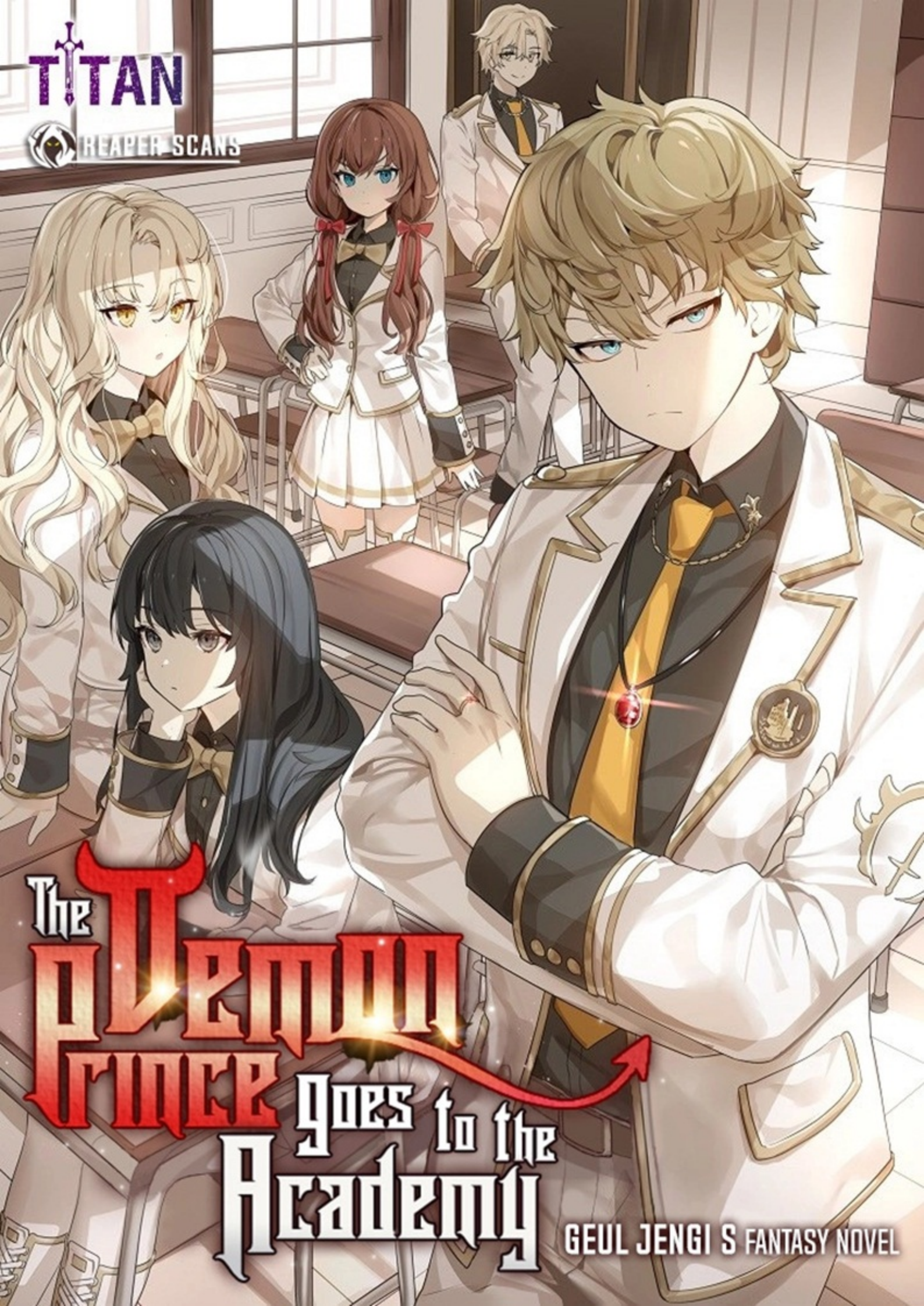
TITAN
REAPER SCANS
The Demon Prince goes to the Academy
GEUL JENGI S FANTASY NOVEL

THE DEMON PRINCE GOES TO THE ACADEMY

– 마왕은 학원에 간다 –

- VOLUME 13 -

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RONOPU

[SUBUDAI11]

CHAPTER 601

Five tombs that had been subjected to grave-robbing attempts.

After excavating not just one tomb, but all five, everyone was able to learn the same fact.

All of the buried coffins had been shattered.

It was speculated that this happened because the undead had come back to life within the ground, breaking their coffins as they crawled back into the world.

But the corpses inside remained undisturbed.

There were corpses with varying degrees of decomposition and dates of death.

Naturally, with countless buried individuals, it was impossible to recognize the faces of the corpses, which have decayed beyond recognition.

“…These aren't the corpses of the fallen."

At Ellen's words, after examining all the unearthed corpses, Louise nodded in agreement.

All of the corpses had preserved their appearance to some extent, regardless of their level of decomposition.

Their very forms indicated that their nutritional states had not been good during their lifetime.

This area had expanded following the Gate Incident, and most of those buried here were soldiers who fell after the incident. So, the majority were military personnel.

It was unlikely that the corpses of soldiers would be so emaciated.

"No injuries either."

“…Yes."

Moreover, most of the corpses here were those who had fallen in battle.

Naturally, they were the ones who had died fighting monsters. Their corpses should have had some body parts missing, or even their skulls gone, with traces of fatal injuries.

But the corpses appeared malnourished, with all their limbs intact.

"These are definitely the corpses of refugees."

Hence, these were the bodies of people who had died from disease or starvation.

"Then… after resurrecting the corpses, someone replaced them in these tombs with other bodies… Why would they do that?"

Heinrich raised this question, but the other three could not provide an answer.

Resurrecting corpses as undead was a crazy act.

But resurrecting the undead, taking them away, and placing other corpses in the tombs was not just crazy but also bizarre.

Their intentions were unfathomable.

Ellen carefully dusted off her hands as she crawled out of the pit.

"What's certain is that someone tampered with these tombs. Though we don't know why the bodies were swapped."

There were two groups suspected of being involved: grave robbers or those related to the undead.

But even if the grave robbers were responsible, or the people they were currently chasing, swapping the corpses was exceedingly strange.

It served no purpose.

Usually, extreme acts like exhuming tombs to check the contents wouldn't happen.

It was understandable to smooth over the disturbed earth to erase the traces of the tombs being dug up, but why go as far as to disguise the corpses?

"But… shouldn't we quickly rebury these somehow?"

Heinrich grew increasingly anxious, knowing that if someone were to see this scene, chaos would surely ensue—even if this place was hidden from view.

Of course, even if they were to rebury the tombs, the fact that they had been excavated would be evident.

"Wait, just a moment."

But whether Heinrich was anxious or not, Louise was carefully examining each tomb with a significant expression.

They had unearthed a total of five tombs.

Five tombs that had been targeted by grave robbers.

All the coffins used for burial were broken, and the bodies inside were not the original occupants.

"If the grave robbers had forcibly broken the coffins and replaced the bodies, we wouldn't know why they did such a thing. If the perpetrators of the incident we're pursuing were involved, it would make sense that they raised the original owners of the graves as undead and took them away, but there's no reason to put other bodies in their place…"

The body-swapping.

That part just didn't make sense and didn't fit.

"Ellen."

"Yes."

Louise looks at Ellen with a stern expression.

"Can we dig up another grave?"

"…"

"A grave that hasn't been tampered with."

"Alright."

Ellen nodded.

—---

The graves that had been tampered with were close to each other.

This time, Ellen began to dig up a grave that was further away.

Hoping that this would not be an act of desecration, Ellen, as well as Louise, dug up the graves.

Soon, they had uncovered a sixth grave.

"This time…"

"It's intact."

Unlike the other five graves.

This time, the coffin was covered in dirt but maintained a decent appearance.

It wasn't broken like the other coffins that had been tampered with.

"Nothing happened here, right?"

"Probably…"

Heinrich and Ludwig sighed with relief from above the pit.

Ellen looked at Louise with a stern expression, as if asking whether to proceed with the next step.

"Let's open it."

"Okay."

Ellen grabbed the lid of the coffin and exerted force.

-Thud!

With a fairly loud noise, the lid opened, and Louise and Ellen could see inside.

The face of the corpse was still unrecognizable.

"It's another different body here…"

However, the withered, twisted appearance of the corpse and the intact limbs.

The appearance of the corpse, which could hardly be seen as a casualty, made it clear that it was completely unrelated to the name written on the tombstone.

Ellen, Louise, Ludwig, and Heinrich were all dumbfounded as they stared at the corpse.

"What on earth…"

Ellen muttered.

"Where did it all go wrong…?"

Now.

Truly now.

What was the problem, and where did it start?

They couldn't even guess.

The sixth grave was different from the others.

This time, the coffin was intact, but the body inside had been replaced.

This led to a horrifying speculation.

After confirming this, Louise and Ellen climbed out of the pit.

"How did you know?"

Louise's suspicion that the bodies had been swapped in a completely different grave apart from the five graves that had been tampered with.

Because of that, they imagined that this case might not be the work of grave robbers or the forces they were pursuing but rather a more fundamental problem.

"If this scene is the work of those we're pursuing, there were things they should have taken and things they wouldn't have taken."

"They should have taken the undead."

"And the things they wouldn't take. To be precise, the things they wouldn't be interested in."

"Funeral items."

Items buried with the body.

"The bodies were swapped, but there were no funeral items in any of the graves."

The people who caused the incident in the underground cemetery of the Holy Knights Order were not concerned with a mere penny.

They were confident enough to bring the corpses back to life as undead and take them away, but they certainly weren't the type to care about treasures buried with the bodies.

There was one more common point in all the tombs they had excavated so far.

None of the tombs had burial items.

"Most of the time, at least the weapons and armor are buried as burial items, if not the warrior's personal belongings. Especially in the case of fallen warriors. But there were no burial items in any of the tombs, and all the corpses… although they were

dressed in shrouds, there were no items buried with them, and all their clothes were the same. And even though the corpses were switched, there were no burial items left in the tombs, meaning it wasn't the work of grave robbers or those we're chasing."

"…"

"It must have been like that from the time they were buried."

The switched corpses were not the work of the ones they were pursuing or the grave robbers.

From the beginning, the corpses had been switched when they were buried.

"The cemetery manager wouldn't have the influence to make such a thing possible."

Everyone began to fearfully imagine the possibilities.

Louise quietly looked at Ellen.

"Ellen."

"Yes."

"It seems there are too many things entwined here."

The incident that began with the death of the Archbishop was spreading without limit.

The Archbishop had been a heretic inquisitor.

The Holy Knights had an unknown internal problem.

The murdered heretic inquisitor had been chasing the remains of the undead saints.

Even in the national cemetery that seemed to be related to the culprits, the buried corpses had been switched.

Everything they had discovered so far did not lead to a single conclusion.

Each clue revealed entirely different issues.

There were too many problems in the world, and all of these problems inevitably showed the tip of another insurmountable issue.

The switched corpses in the Royal National Cemetery.

The scale of this case was too large to be seen as mere misbehavior by the cemetery manager. He couldn't have done such a thing.

So, the switching of the corpses in the national cemetery must have involved a larger force. The permission or command of a greater power, or at least their tacit approval.

Without that, such an attempt could not be made.

Although they would have to check other tombs one by one to confirm their suspicions and turn them into decisive truths.

Ellen muttered blankly.

"Is it… right to assume that the Empire is involved in this…?"

"Probably."

Louise could only nod with a grim expression.

What had they done by switching the corpses?

What were they trying to do?

"Wait a minute… if all the other places have different corpses buried as well…"

Ludwig's eyes widened with a lost expression.

"Asher's tomb too…?"

At those words, Heinrich and Ellen clenched their teeth.

Find Asher.

He said that they would know everything once they found him.

The ones buried in the tomb were not the tomb's owners but completely unrelated people.

That meant they still hadn't found Asher.

It wasn't enough to open all the other tombs and confirm that all the corpses had been switched.

Asher's tomb.

If they could just verify that one more tomb, their suspicions would turn into certainty.

"Over there! What are you doing?!"

In the end, no matter how inconspicuous the location, someone eventually discovered them digging up the tombs after quite some time.

Where did the problem begin?

What should be addressed first?

The death of the heretic inquisitor.

The remains of the saints turned undead.

The switched corpses in the national cemetery.

No one could be sure anymore that all the clues were pointing in the same direction.

Everything could be a problem.

If everything in the world was a problem, how should this matter be resolved?

Ellen started digging in the snow melted by Heinrich, plunging her shovel into the grave.

The cemetery manager and the soldiers watched, their faces pale.

The cemetery soldiers, who had suddenly seen the hero digging up the tomb, couldn't help but be alarmed, and Ellen didn't offer any explanation or apology to them.

She brought the cemetery manager and told him to fetch a shovel as well. Ellen found Asher's tomb again.

The hero dug up her friend's grave.

In front of Ellen's determined expression, the cemetery manager couldn't bring himself to stop her, only shuffling his feet nervously.

She had once dug up the grave with her bare hands. It was easier and faster with a tool.

With every thrust of the covered-in-blue-aura shovel, the earth revealed its insides fiercely.

In no time, Ellen had dug down to the depth where Asher's coffin was. She wedged the shovel blade under the coffin lid and twisted it, breaking it open.

Crackle!

"…"

This time, it should be a corpse they could recognize.

As all four of them had anticipated.

There was a decaying, unfamiliar face inside.

"Hero… Why are you doing this…?"

Without saying a word, Ellen crawled out of the pit and handed the shovel to the cemetery manager.

"Fill the grave and act as if you haven't seen or heard anything about this."

Looking at the others frozen in place, not just the cemetery manager.

"Keep this in mind, everyone. If you don't want to die prematurely."

After digging up a total of seven graves.

Ellen was now certain that all the corpses in the national cemetery had been switched.

Ellen said so, then gestured to her companions.

"Let's go."

There was nothing left for them to do at the national cemetery.

CHAPTER 602

Ellen didn't give any explanations to the staff of the National Cemetery, whose spirits had been crushed.

They were too insignificant to be involved in these matters. It would be better for their safety if they remained ignorant.

After leaving the National Cemetery, Ellen brushed off the dirt that clung to her clothes.

Everyone was in a state of confusion.

"I still don't know exactly what's going on. But there are a few things that have become clear."

And the one feeling the most intense confusion was none other than Ellen herself.

"The Empire is doing something with the corpses. Or at least they know about it. That much is certain."

It was impossible to be sure whether all the problems that had arisen originated from the Empire. However, the likelihood that the Empire was unaware of the events at the National Cemetery was very low.

Ellen looked up at the snowy sky.

Numerous clues began to move in the right direction in front of the decisive truth.

While some things might still be false, the clues that followed the confirmed direction continued to flow.

"Now I understand."

Ellen looked at Ludwig.

"Why Archbishop Rowan approached you."

"You understand?"

"Yes."

The reason Rowan approached Ludwig.

There were various speculations on the first day.

Rowan knew the cause of the Gate incident. Thus, she approached Ellen through Ludwig to harm her. Such a speculation existed.

Ellen thought that the reason Rowan approached Ludwig was related to the annihilation of the Hero Religion and had nothing to do with this case.

However, that speculation was overturned in the face of a truth she couldn't have considered yesterday.

Now that she had realized the Empire might be behind these events.

Ellen understood why Rowan had approached Ludwig.

"She didn't want to hurt me through you; she wanted to investigate this case through you."

All of Rowan's actions were heading in the same direction.

The incident that occurred in the underground tomb of the saints.

It was part of her plan to track down that incident.

Ludwig could not help but be utterly baffled by Ellen's words.

"How could I…?"

Ellen pointed south towards the Imperial Capital.

Something beyond the fluttering snowflakes, invisible to the eye.

"Your status as a Temple student was important."

The Temple.

"Because very few people can enter the Temple."

Those who can freely enter and exit the Temple did not know how difficult it was to enter the Temple, or how close to impossible it was to infiltrate it.

It was not a place that allowed access to just anyone.

To begin with, the Temple had strict access control even when it functioned properly.

"She must have wanted to learn about the events happening in the Temple through you."

Rowan had approached Ludwig for that purpose.

She herself could not enter the Temple.

"Wait, wait a minute… What does the Temple have to do with this case…?"

At Ludwig's question, Ellen sighed quietly.

"Let's go to the Magic University."

Ellen walked ahead in silence.

"Then you'll understand."

Now that they knew what had happened and what the events up until now meant in the face of the decisive truth.

Numerous puzzles were drawing a picture closer to completion.

And so, their destination was clear.

The Temple Magic University.

One could only wonder what the guards, who had been protecting the University as if guarding a grave secret, had been doing there.

Now, they had a rough idea.

Following Ellen, Louise's expression hardened for a different reason.

'Why… Why me?'

If something was going on at the Temple, and entry was strictly controlled,

The Empire would have to keep this matter hidden more than anyone else.

Why was she allowed to enter the Temple? It was an event where she might learn the Empire's weaknesses or secrets, and she had come to the brink of actually finding out.

Why on earth did they let her in?

Louise couldn't fathom it.

But in the end, their path was clear.

"Wait."

Louise, who had been lost in thought, suddenly stopped.

Ellen, Heinrich, and Ludwig looked at Louise's stern expression.

"If, at the Temple Magic University… what we're chasing is really there… and if the Empire is behind all this… Does that mean the Empire killed Archbishop Rowan?"

“…Perhaps so."

"The Empire killed the priestess…?"

"Rowan must have found out that the Empire was behind what happened at the Holy Knights' Tomb of the Saints. And she must have realized they were up to something within the Temple. That's why she approached Ludwig."

Rowan had discovered something and tried to investigate the Temple through Ludwig.

"And the Empire caught wind of it, so they killed not only Rowan but also the people of the Inquisition who were close to the truth."

The Inquisitor, who was getting too close to the truth, was not to be allowed.

The Empire had no choice but to act against her.

But it was still incomprehensible why the Empire would take such a risky move as tampering with the Tomb of the Saints.

However, the clues now strongly pointed to the Empire as the core of the matter, and there was no room for further debate.

"We're probably already being monitored by the Empire. We visited the Magic University yesterday."

“…That's likely."

Though for a completely different reason, they had been found out the moment they reached the vicinity of the Magic University in search of Anna de Gerna.

"From the moment we decided to look into this matter, the Empire might have known all our actions."

"That could be true…”

If the Empire was at the heart of this incident, they would have been watching their every move and action.

The Imperial Capital was under the Empire's jurisdiction, and the Temple was the core of the Empire.

They had talked about being cautious since the monsters who killed Rowan might be after them as they investigated the matter.

But from the moment they decided to investigate, the Empire might have already been aware of their every move.

Stopping by the burned church.

Visiting the Holy Knights' Cathedral.

Going to the Magic University.

Visiting the National Cemetery.

All their steps had likely been tracked.

And now, as they approached the truth,

"Was it because you were involved that they couldn't attack us…?"

If the monsters were not from some other group but the Empire, they could never touch Ellen.

In the end, it was because Ellen was Ellen.

The Empire might be utterly unable to do anything about the pursuit of these four people.

Was it because Ellen was among the pursuers that the Empire was in a situation where they can't do anything?

Louise had already resolved to get involved in this matter, prepared to face a certain degree of danger.

However, it also meant confronting the empire head-on.

From the beginning, it was never possible to back out at a convenient moment. The empire had been watching since the start.

Investigating the murder case and ensuring the safety of the hero.

Although she had thought that to be her utmost priority, Louise now found herself entangled in a potentially monumental affair that could determine the fate of the Schwarz royal family, knowing that the empire was deeply involved in this matter.

Seeing Louise suddenly having to make a tremendous resolution, Ellen spoke plainly.

"I'll protect you, no matter what."

"You will?"

"Yes."

Ellen slowly nodded her head.

Louise had said that Ellen's matter was a matter of humanity.

Ellen knew full well what Louise had risked to help her.

Therefore, with the same mindset, Ellen would protect Louise, who had helped her.

There was no choice but to try to protect the Schwarz royal family as well.

The four of them held closely related secrets, or suspicions, involving the empire.

A massive corruption.

They were going back to the temple to uncover it.

The temple was their home, but now that they knew that strange and dangerous things were happening in that home without their knowledge, they had no choice but to return to the temple with a completely different mindset.

Upon returning to the temple, the group headed straight for the Magic University.

Since their destination was clear, they needed to see with their own eyes what was happening at that place.

The place, which was restricted for an entirely different reason, was actually closely related to the case.

And they couldn't help but see someone in a space where no one should have been.

In the falling snow, a person sat still with an umbrella resting on their shoulder.

"Lady Turner."

"…"

Saviolin Turner.

She was sitting alone on a bench, quietly watching Ellen and her companions approaching under her umbrella.

She silently stood up from the bench.

Somehow, she looked as though she had been waiting, knowing they would come.

"Did you know I was coming?"

“…I had hoped you wouldn't."

Saviolin Turner stood still, looking at Ellen.

"If you came back here, it would mean you already know something."

If they knew nothing, they would not return to this intersection leading to the Magic University.

If they learned something and realized that there was something there, they would seek this path again.

That's why Saviolin Turner was guarding the crossroads.

While hoping Ellen wouldn't come.

"If I had just told you not to look into anything further, you would have known that the empire was involved in this. So, I wished you would rather not know. But it's been only three days. Just… three days."

Saviolin Turner exhaled a white breath.

"You're too fast, Ellen."

Looking at Ellen, who had reached the truth she shouldn't have known so quickly, Saviolin Turner seemed sad, unable to merely admire her exceptional execution and action.

Now, Saviolin Turner looked not at Ellen, but at the person beside her.

Louise von Schwarz.

"Your Highness."

"…"

"I never thought you would repay the Emperor's kindness in such a way."

Louise von Schwarz stared wide-eyed at Saviolin Turner.

The emperor's kindness.

It wasn't just about allowing her to enter the temple.

From the beginning, it was the Emperor who advised that in order to save Heinrich, her siblings had to be killed.

Saviolin Turner questioned the audacity of ignoring the Emperor's favor and digging into the empire's secrets.

At that, Louise furrowed her brow.

"I know I'm not in a position to discuss benevolence and guidance."

The moment she killed her siblings with her own hands, she had already long abandoned any virtues.

"Don't you know that I'm not here to dig into the empire's weaknesses, Lady Turner?"

Saviolin Turner looked at Heinrich and Ludwig behind him.

"Whatever you saw was a coincidence, whatever you knew was a misunderstanding, and whatever you imagined was a delusion."

"Accept it even if you can't."

"Since knowing won't change anything, you'd better live in ignorance."

"In this world,"

"There are things that hurt when you know them."

"And there are things that make you sadder when you know them."

"Ellen."

"Don't you know that well?"

"From now on, there is nothing for you to know."

"Just accept it and step back."

"Discovering the truth will only make it harder to bear the burden of sin."

"Isn't that unnecessary?"

At those words, Ellen's eyes widened.

Things that hurt when you know them.

Things that are sadder when you know them.

Now there's nothing but those things left.

Living in ignorance is better than knowing the painful truth.

It was not that nothing was happening.

Something was happening.

Something terrible was happening, and it has already happened.

If the truth only led to sharing the burden of sin, it was better not to know.

But to go back knowing nothing.

Ellen, who already knew too many sad truths, couldn't help but hesitate at Saviolin Turner's sincere plea.

Although her attitude was forceful, Saviolin Turner was clearly appealing to Ellen and the other three.

To step back.

With all her heart.

"We can't just go back like that…”

Ludwig muttered blankly.

"What… are you doing with the people who were already pitiful just by being dead…? They couldn't even die in peace, and now you're doing this to them even after death…”

"I won't justify it. I have no intention of justifying it, and I'm not the person to do such things."

Saviolin Turner's tone was cold and rational.

"So, let's think about it simply."

Saviolin Turner stood in the middle of the street with an umbrella.

The one and only being who reached the realm of Grandmaster on the continent.

Her own prowess surpasses that of the hero Ellen Artorius, and she was cautiously evaluated as being on par with or even more powerful than Ellen at her peak.

Without possessing a single relic, she has carried out operations more difficult or dangerous than those involving Ellen, who held two relics, and remains unscathed.

"It's better not to know these things. Better not to. When all this is revealed later, the fact that you didn't know anything will be your absolution."

"Are you saying that if we know what you're doing, we'll have no choice but to keep silent?"

"Yes. Because I'm doing something that leaves you with no other choice."

Turner nodded at Ellen's question.

It's better to remain ignorant than to share the guilt of knowing.

"This is not for me or the empire, but for you."

Knowing about this matter would make them feel guilt and responsibility just by being aware of it.

If, later on, when everything is revealed, they want to escape the blame, then they must remain ignorant.

Will they become silent accomplices by knowing the truth? Or, having had the chance to learn the truth, will they claim ignorance when everything is eventually exposed?

A hero shouldn't know about such things.

Because a hero is the hope of the people.

When some evil is exposed, they must be someone who is unrelated to that evil.

A hero must be an absolute paragon.

So, it's better not to know.

"You know,"

Ellen speaks quietly.

"Even if I don't know about this trivial matter, I can't buy my absolution."

"I won't even try. You know that."

"If it's a painful truth to know, I already know many."

"Being called a hero by others is more tiring and difficult now than ever before, so how much harder can it get?"

"So, knowing a little more won't matter."

"Move aside, Lady Turner."

"I need to find out what's going on."

Louise silently listened to Ellen's meaningful words.

The truth that should not be known.

Absolution.

Things about the Gate incident that people didn’t know.

Louise and Heinrich couldn't help but realize that Ellen was talking about those things.

CHAPTER 603

Saviolin Turner looked at Ellen with sad eyes.

They couldn't communicate.

In the end, there was only one means left for them to connect.

"I don't want to hurt you."

The words of Saviolin Turner.

"I feel the same way."

Ellen's response.

Their words to each other already revealed their thoughts about one another.

Both showed that they believed themselves to be superior.

It seemed like a childish battle of pride, but these two who had risen to the ranks of the continent's strongest could not simply be dismissed with a petty fight over self-esteem.

Indeed, was Ellen Artorious the stronger one, or was it Saviolin Turner?

"…"

"…"

In the silence, they stared at each other.

In the end, they couldn't help but measure the distance between them.

Am I stronger?

Is my opponent stronger?

"Ellen…”

Heinrich looked at Ellen with cold sweat.

It was important to know what the Empire was up to, but it was absurd that, completely out of the blue, Saviolin Turner and Ellen would clash swords.

"It's okay. I won't kill her."

At Ellen's arrogant words, not only Heinrich, but Saviolin Turner too, held a faint smile.

"So you know how to provoke."

“…It's not a provocation, just stating a fact."

Ellen spoke calmly.

"If you don't move aside right now."

Woosh

Ellen's body began to surge with blue aura.

"Be prepared to get hurt."

"…”

Not using the void sword.

At those words, which somehow sounded cute, Turner sighed.

"So you won't use the divine artifact?"

Void Sword Lament.

Sun Cloak Lapelt.

As if intending to confront her barehanded, without using either of them, Saviolin Turner seemed taken aback.

"I don't need them."

"You should think otherwise."

As if to say that without the unfair power of a divine artifact, Ellen couldn't even touch her, Saviolin Turner's expression darkened.

Though she had intended to block Ellen.

The arrogance of trying to face her without even a divine artifact.

That attitude truly angered Saviolin Turner.

"Take those words back."

Saviolin Turner threw her umbrella aside.

"If you don't step back now…"

Rumble!

The magical storm emanating from Saviolin Turner's body blew away the accumulated snow in an instant.

Her fluttering hair settled down as the magical shockwave created a storm, and her sharp gaze fixed on Ellen.

"Until winter passes, I'll make sure you can't leave your bed."

"Try me."

"Really…"

Thud!

In a momentary charge, Saviolin Turner had already reached Ellen's face.

"You never listen!"

Crash!

"…!"

One punch.

Ellen, who took the direct hit, broke through the trees and was thrown to the outskirts of the road, while Heinrich and Ludwig, except for Louise, were swept away by the aftermath, tumbling to the ground.

"Don't act so arrogantly for no reason."

Saviolin Turner walked toward Ellen, who was embedded in the forest.

"Take out your divine artifact."

Furious at Ellen's arrogance, trying to face her on equal terms without even a divine artifact, Saviolin Turner was genuinely enraged.

Suddenly, something flew through the broken trees.

'Snow…?'

A snowball flew towards her face, and with a swift motion, Saviollin Turner dodged the incoming attack.

"Are you really trying to play games right now?!"

But Turner’s scolding was only temporary.

She had already seen Ellen, in the midst of the rising dust, bending her waist for a powerful strike.

A spinning kick.

-Wham!

“…Ugh!"

Although Turner managed to block the attack with her forearm, she couldn't help but stagger a few steps back from the force of the kick.

"There's no need for this."

With a calm expression, Ellen started to charge towards the retreating Turner.

Neither of them intended to kill the other, but in the heat of the moment, their emotions took over.

“Stop!”

The sudden shout, familiar to both of them, brought the fight to an abrupt halt.

“…Bertus."

"Your Majesty…”

The emperor approached, pushing his way through the snowstorm.

Bertus, who had suddenly appeared, stopped the unexpected brawl between the two most powerful humans.

Without explanation or justification, he seated them all in the lobby of the Magic University, breaking through the strict security.

This included Louise von Schwarz.

"…”

"…”

Ellen and Saviollin Turner remained silent, staring at the floor.

"I told you to stop Ellen from entering. I don't recall telling you to throw punches."

“…My apologies, Your Majesty."

Turner closed her mouth, stopping herself from arguing about her method of stopping Ellen.

Bertus looked at the silent Ellen.

"You too, didn't have to… Fine… I didn't come here for a pleasant reason anyway."

Bertus looked at the people gathered there.

It wasn't just Ellen - Ludwig, Heinrich, and even the princess of the Kernstadt were present.

After glancing at them, Bertus looked back at Ellen.

"Is it absolutely necessary for you to know?"

In the end, the emperor repeated the same question that Turner had asked earlier.

"I'll tell you this – even if you tell me not to, I'll continue pursuing this, and nothing will change."

"…"

"So, it's a problem only because you have to know."

"I must know."

Ellen spoke softly.

"It is my duty to know."

It was not her right to know but her duty to know.

Seeing Ellen's strong sense of responsibility, Bertus couldn't help but smile bitterly.

"If this isn't just a bad thing, then I want to know even more. What exactly is happening, and why is it necessary? I need to know."

Unable to resist Ellen's unwavering determination, Bertus finally gave in.

"…Fine."

He looked at someone other than Ellen.

"Perhaps it's for the best."

Louise couldn't understand why Bertus was looking at her and saying that.

"And, let me make one thing clear."

Bertus looked at everyone's faces.

"I didn't kill Rowan."

“…What?"

Everyone had thought they had reached the end, but Bertus's words turned everything upside down once more.

"It might be hard to believe, but that's the truth."

A series of terrible coincidences had led Ellen to this point.

The theft of the remains in the underground crypt of the Holy Knights was not related to the Empire.

"Then who… Who killed the priestess?"

At this unexpected revelation, Ludwig's eyes widened in shock.

Rowan's death had led them here, but if Bertus had nothing to do with Rowan's death, then the matter was far from over.

So who had killed Rowan?

"I don't know."

Whether he truly didn't know or were pretending not to know was unclear.

No one could tell the truth.

'An emergency meeting?'

'Yes, the Five Popes have urgent matters to discuss. They are gathering at the Als Cathedral.'

Eleion Bolton was now leaving the Cathedral of the Holy Knights and had arrived at Als Cathedral.

Among the five holy religions, only Als religion had a cathedral in the Imperial Capital.

The Holy Knights' Cathedral was a place where the powers of the five holy religions were concentrated. Therefore, aside from Als Pope, the other four Popes resided in the churches of their respective factions, which were relatively less prestigious.

Due to their location and circumstances, it was customary for the conferences of the Five Popes to be held at the Holy Knights' Cathedral. There was no better place, both symbolically and functionally.

However, the fact that the emergency meeting of the Five Popes was taking place at Als Cathedral made Eleion Bolton feel rather peculiar.

Why would they call him here specifically?

Nevertheless, strictly speaking, the leader of the Holy Knights was subordinate to the Popes.

It was Eleion Bolton's duty to attend when called.

Despite being extremely busy with his own affairs, he had no choice but to attend.

It was uncomfortable not knowing why the Popes had gathered.

There were no attendants or performers due to the emergency nature of the meeting.

Though Als Religion had lost much of its power, its cathedral was still grand and imposing, and there were no passersby pointing fingers at it.

Eleion Bolton arrived alone at Als Cathedral and entered.

In the conference room on the top floor of Als Cathedral…

'Everyone… has been dismissed.'

Upon arriving at the empty upper floor, devoid of any priests or knights, Eleion Bolton felt a chill run down his spine.

What were they talking about?

What were they plotting?

What should he do if something unexpected happened?

Amidst countless concerns, Eleion Bolton opened the door to the conference room on the top floor, neither too hastily nor too timidly.

As with any other conference room, there was a round table.

As expected, the five Popes were seated at the table. They looked at Eleion Bolton with stern expressions as he appeared.

The Five Popes were present.

However, Eleion Bolton could not help but fixate his gaze elsewhere, completely forgetting to pay his respects to the Popes.

There was an additional person in a space meant only for the Five Popes.

A person sitting in a chair, smiling and watching him, laughed as he made eye contact with Eleion Bolton.

Eleion Bolton, who rarely lost his composure, turned pale.

"Eleion Bolton."

"You…!"

"It's been about three years."

There, sitting nonchalantly, was none other than the Demon King, Reinhardt.

The appearance he had while disguised as a human.

Reinhardt gestured towards the chair in front of Eleion Bolton with his chin.

"What are you waiting for? Sit down."

He spoke arrogantly, as if he owned the place.

The Death Knights we created.

The Chimera Homunculus Undead created by the Empire.

They were similar in purpose from the beginning.

We had to replenish the Death Knights, and for that, we needed corpses.

However, at that point, we were unaware that the Empire was engaged in a similar endeavor.

It was only after supplementing the Death Knights from the tomb of the saints that I began to learn about the Empire's activities.

There was always a slight concern.

What if the Holy Knights, who were investigating this case, inadvertently discovered what the Empire was doing?

After hearing the truth from Bertus, we had a brief conversation.

"I'm already tracking it. I'm being cautious, but who knows how things will turn out."

Of course, the Holy Knights would investigate the incident that occurred in their territory.

There was no reason to cover up or hide the scene in the first place.

What did it matter if they found out that I was responsible for what happened there?

But oddly enough, the case was connected to a secret of the Empire that should not have been revealed.

We may have caused the incident, but it was the Empire that risked being exposed.

Soon, the bizarre butterfly effect of my actions could lead to the Empire being caught in a trap.

But since there was nothing I could do about it, I decided to stay in the temple and watch the situation unfold.

Then, Archbishop Rowan died.

I, like Ellen, did not believe the claims that the refugees killed Rowan, as Ludwig had insisted.

Archbishop Rowan, who had been working with Ludwig on the disease purification project, was dead.

Something must have happened.

At that point, unlike Ellen, who was just starting her investigation, I was already aware of most of the hidden truths behind the scenes.

There was a high probability that Archbishop Rowan's death was not an ordinary event.

Naturally, I went to Bertus first.

Thanks to Sarkegaar, I could meet him immediately after setting up the location.

Bertus was already aware of the issue.

"Not you?"

"That's right, we didn't do it."

Bertus said that it wasn't the Empire's doing in the incident that occurred at the church.

"We did consider whether we should deal with it or not."

“…You considered it?"

"She's a heresy inquisitor, that woman."

Unsurprisingly, Bertus knew something I didn't.

"I found out yesterday as well, it seems that she deliberately approached Ludwig. She couldn't enter the temple, so she tried whatever means she could… I'm just as baffled."

Rowan was a heresy inquisitor and was naturally investigating the events within the Holy Knights.

Although the reality was different, after discovering the connection between the temple and the missing corpse, she obtained information about Ludwig and deliberately approached him.

Bertus was aware of the situation.

The heresy inquisitor, who should not have known the truth, tried to use Ludwig.

But then she suddenly died.

Bertus was just as perplexed by the situation.

I, too, believed that there was a high likelihood that the Empire had killed Rowan.

Rowan was a heresy inquisitor, pursuing the case, and had the temple in mind, so the Empire had ample reason to silence her by killing her.

However, the Empire was not the perpetrator.

"I'm not sure of the exact reason, but it could be an internal purge."

“…What? A purge?"

It was an unexpected claim.

"Reinhardt, listen carefully."

The story I heard from Bertus was long, but the content was simple.

The possibility that the Five Great Religions harbored different intentions.

To be precise, the intentions of the leaders of each order.

"What… nonsense is this…?"

I couldn't help but be dumbfounded upon hearing these words from Bertus.

"They… are preparing to take my side?"

"Perhaps."

From Bertus's perspective, it was betrayal.

From my perspective, it was either switching sides or submission.

"I don't know which side the deceased priestess belonged to, but now that the matter has surfaced, the flow can't be stopped."

"…"

"The Orders and the Holy Knights might split, and a civil war could break out. That would further complicate the situation."

"So, what… should we do?"

"We have to stop it. Until the Gate incident is resolved, we can't let anyone bleed for such a ridiculous matter."

That was something Bertus couldn't do. It was something only I could do.

"Do you understand what you're saying?"

At my question, Bertus gave a bitter smile.

"How could I not?"

"…"

I was left speechless.

CHAPTER 604

It was impossible to know when Ellen would uncover the truth. However, it seemed that Ellen's attempt to unravel the matter might lead to an unexpected revelation.

There was no one who could stand in Ellen's way.

My actions had provoked the Holy Knights, and the one investigating the case had obtained a clue.

And then they were killed.

It was bound to take a long time to investigate the case without any knowledge of what had happened.

Although the real culprits would not be caught, Ellen would discover an unrelated truth.

It was impossible to know what judgment Ellen would make in the face of that truth.

I could not stop Ellen.

So, I did what I had to do.

And now.

"Why… are you here?"

I watched the commander of the Holy Knights tremble in fear.

"Well, I didn't think I'd be sitting here a few days ago either."

The first one I contacted was the pope of the Als Church.

And at the convened meeting, I confirmed the support of the other four popes for me.

And finally.

Commander of the Holy Knights, Eleion Bolton.

"We are close enough to be honest with each other. Even if my subordinates caused the Gate incident, you know that I never wanted that, right?"

"The great and revered Five Popes have come to understand my intentions. They have agreed to support me from now on, both financially and morally. Of course, they can't do it openly, so… we're negotiating behind the scenes. At least until the right time comes."

"It's sad that I can only gain their trust after the situation has come to this, but what can I do? That was then, this is now."

"Now, we have agreed to establish a strong, close, and intimate relationship."

"From now on, there will be no divisions, infighting, or power struggles. Those things are exhausting."

"Just trust me, the prophet of all of you, and clear your minds."

"The only one left is you, Commander of the Holy Knights."

Eleion Bolton's expression as he listened to the news that the leaders of the Churches had already turned to the side of the Demon King without him knowing was priceless.

It was the face of someone who had lost everything overnight.

"You know, right? If you refuse, the Five Great Religions and the Holy Knights will be torn apart, and the Holy Knights will be divided between those who support the popes and those who support the commander."

"Do you want to gamble with the fate of humanity and the Church?"

"Or, do you just want to join me and pretend like nothing ever happened?"

"You like that, don't you?"

"Maintaining the status quo."

I never imagined I would make such a threatening offer.

It was not that Eleion Bolton didn't have the right to refuse.

It was just that if he did refuse, it wouldn't have only been him who died.

A civil war will break out, and a civil war was synonymous with the extinction of humanity.

The chaos would spread beyond the Church and throughout the entire empire with rumors of the Demon King appearing.

To join me would be to betray humanity.

But not joining me might mean the disappearance of humanity.

He had to consider something he had never thought about before entering the meeting room.

In a short period of time, he would repeatedly weigh many things on a scale.

Eleion Bolton did not particularly like change.

But, strictly speaking, that was not the main point.

Not liking change stemmed from fear and aversion to the chaos that lies beneath. Thus, they desire to maintain the status quo.

But if he realized that everything must inevitably change.

If they understood that it was impossible for things to remain the same.

"…There's no choice."

It was those who have such thoughts who change more easily than anyone else in the world.

With a resentful gaze towards the five popes who had carelessly abandoned

everything, Eleion Bolton stared at me.

"What do you want, Demon King?"

"Didn't I tell you? To maintain the status quo that you love."

But once again, my abrupt remark puzzled not only Eleion Bolton but also the five popes.

“…What?"

"Just keep it as it is."

My purpose for coming here was to stop the discord between the Holy Knight Order and the five major religious factions.

And to swallow them up in the process.

The popes were preparing to side with me, and the Holy Knight Order's leader was uncomfortable with this development.

Then I must choose one of their sides.

The Empire cannot side with the leader of the Holy Knight Order. Doing so would provoke a backlash from the popes.

However, I can side with the popes. They can suppress the resistance from the Holy Knight Order's leader.

"Well, did you think I would want to annihilate humanity now and order you all to die? That's not going to happen."

"…”

"Keep it this way. There's no need to set up a confrontation with the Empire. Basically, I'm saying that I'll be the liver or the spleen for you who are trying to cling to one and then the other."

Swallowing them up is nothing more than an empty threat.

The popes were willing to turn against humanity, but there was only one real reason for doing so.

Because they knew that I have no intention of being hostile towards humanity. Because they knew that I have no reason to make any outrageous demands of them.

In the end, they were merely using me.

"So let's set this nonsense aside and discuss what's most important."

I can obtain cooperation from the Holy Knight Order and the five major religious factions. And if I want to rule, I can. But that was impossible for now.

And these snake-like elderly popes will discard me when I am no longer useful, and if they deem the Empire stronger, they will treat me as the traitor of the century once again.

I didn't particularly find that disgusting or sad.

Their allegiance changed like flipping a palm according to the balance of power.

If you're weak, you'll be ignored, and if you're strong, you can ignore.

Right now, they didn't know what the Empire was doing.

That's why they're trying to take my side. They believed that the Demon King and his forces can potentially wipe out humanity at any time.

And that was also true.

Eleion Bolton had determined that the situation was irreversible, and while he needed to consider it for a long time, he was not given any situation other than making a quick decision.

So, regardless of his true intentions, he decided to cooperate with me for now.

The more important issue.

"Rowan, did you kill her?"

The real culprit behind Rowan's death.

I want to know that.

Just as Bertus suggested, was she purged?

"No."

Eleion Bolton shook his head.

"I didn't kill her."

The Empire did not kill Rowan.

Bertus had suggested the possibility of a purge.

But the popes claimed it wasn't their doing.

"It's strange. The popes here said it wasn't their doing, and if you're not the culprit either, who on earth

The commander of the Holy Knights also denied his involvement.

"I intended to kill her. That's true."

At his words, the expressions of the popes couldn't help but change.

"But, even if the other inquisitors didn't know, I couldn't kill Rowan."

"Hmm… So that means…"

There were several possibilities, but if he wasn't lying, then one of the more likely possibilities was:

"Could it be that she didn't die?"

Exactly, a self-staged drama.

"Yes. The corpse was a fake, covered with a cloth."

Rowan was not dead.

A fire had broken out at the scene.

It was strange.

It had been bothering me constantly.

It was too conspicuous.

If it were an execution, it should have been carried out discreetly and all evidence destroyed.

However, if the Popes or Eleion Bolton, or the others had tried to execute Rowan, there should not have been a fire.

The fire itself drew far too much attention from people.

Therefore, if this were an execution, there should have been no fire.

But the fire did break out, and many people saw the flames engulfing the temple. That's why looters swarmed in.

And Ludwig saw it, the information reached Ellen, and now Ellen was pursuing the truth.

"Yes… It's as if the fire was started in hopes that someone would finally discover the torture and killing of civilians in the church basement."

The fire happened, and civilians entered the temple to loot. The horrible scene in the basement went unnoticed, because there were no looters crazy enough to enter the burning building, and Eleion Bolton responded quickly.

But in the end, they couldn't stop Ellen from seeing the basement.

It was an incident designed to draw attention from the start.

The possibility that the commander of the Holy Knights and the popes were lying to

my face cannot be ruled out entirely.

However, the fact that they forcibly drew attention was highly suspicious.

And to begin with, Rowan's corpse was a fake.

Inquisitor Rowan was alive.

"Why did you keep that fact a secret?"

The pope of the Tu’an Order glared at the commander of the Holy Knights and asked.

"Have the popes not also hinted at the possibility of such negotiations if the opportunity arose?"

At the words implying that they had betrayed humanity and sided with the Demon King, not only the pope of the Tu’an Order but also the other popes' faces turned red.

"Commander… You must understand that this decision was made for the sake of humanity…”

"Shut up."

The one who spoke wasn't Eleion Bolton, but me.

Disgusting bastards.

I didn't like that they'd come under my command.

I have no desire to do any sort of housecleaning.

I just wanted to resolve this matter quickly and went back to enjoying the jerky Ellen gave me.

"Anyway, it's true that you tried to kill Rowan, right? Although I don't know the details, you failed to kill her in the end?"

"Yes."

At his answer, the archbishop of the Tu’an Order glared at Eleion Bolton.

"Commander, why did you try to kill Archbishop Rowan in the first place?"

Although Rowan ultimately didn't die, it was a fact that Eleion Bolton had tried to kill her and failed.

"I ordered her to cease all investigations, but she didn't listen."

At his words, the popes had no choice but to remain silent.

They knew exactly what Eleion Bolton was talking about.

If one carelessly meddled with the Empire, uncontrollable events might occur.

After returning to the Imperial Capital, Eleion Bolton must have heard the progress of the investigation from Rowan, who had been in charge of the case.

The Empire was suspicious.

Eleion Bolton's command must have been clear. No more digging.

"At a time like this, I believe you would think that digging into the Empire is not the best judgement…"

The five popes showed discomfort, but they didn't directly refute Eleion Bolton's words.

The popes wanted to win me over, but they didn't want to fight the Empire.

The incident that occurred in the underground chamber of the Holy Knights' headquarters.

While tracking it, Rowan determined that the Empire might be the perpetrator of the incident. So, she approached Ludwig.

However, upon learning this, Eleion Bolton decided that if they tried to meddle with the Empire, the entire Church could be destroyed, and he tried to stop Rowan.

But Rowan disobeyed the order of the Holy Knight Commander.

Eleion Bolton devised a plan to purge his subordinate, who tried to tamper with the

powder keg, and carried it out.

"I loyally served like a dog, and when there is a clear case of corruption, not only am I prevented from investigating, but there is even an attempt to purge me…"

She must have seen the spectacle of her subordinates being killed by the Holy Knights with her own eyes.

"If her eyes didn't spin, that is an unusual situation."

My words made Eleion Bolton grind his teeth visibly.

It was certain that almost all of the other Inquisitors have been killed, and the Holy Knights dispatched by Eleion Bolton to purge them were almost all killed by Rowan.

It would be natural for her to feel a sense of betrayal towards the Five Great Religions.

Rowan staged a corpse as herself, set fire to the temple, and fled. She faked her death, escaped, and bought some time.

It was unclear what she planned to do with the time she bought.

In the end, Eleion Bolton's actions were at the core of this incident.

But what if I had been Eleion Bolton?

The Empire had nothing to do with the theft of the underground remains at the Temple Knights' headquarters, but they were utilizing the bodies of the fallen soldiers.

Simply digging into the case would create friction with the Empire.

Digging into the Empire was already dangerous, and Rowan insisted that she couldn't stop investigating the case.

In the end, Eleion Bolton only partially succeeded in the purge. He killed all of Rowan's subordinates, but he failed to kill Rowan himself.

Half-failure meant Rowan left a fake corpse behind and disappeared.

"No matter what happens from now on, the fact that it's my mistake remains unchanged. Because I wasn't perfect."

The Holy Knight Commander made the choice he thought was best, but ultimately failed to kill Rowan.

No one knew what kind of ripple effect this will create.

"We don't know what Rowan will do next, but we… Ironically, you are the one we need most."

What does that mean?

I'm needed?

The one who answered was not Eleion Bolton.

"I don't know what the Demon King will think… But Rowan was a radical."

It was the unexpected remark of the Tu'an Church Pope.

"A radical?"

"Inside the Church, especially within the Tu'an and Als Churches… There are many such priests."

"What kind of priests are they?"

"Those who believe the Demon King to be a prophet."

"…?"

What did he say?

"There are quite a few of them who believe that the Demon King is the true prophet."

What on earth did that mean?

"It's not just those two Churches."

It was the words of the Riter Church Pope.

"That day, at the temple, the Holy Knights and priests who saw you… Surely you know it wasn't a small number."

Even Eleion Bolton said that.

"They were high-ranking Holy Knights and priests of the Church. Rowan was among them, too."

They believed that I didn't want the Gate incident to happen.

The priests who saw me explaining how to deal with the Gate incident since it was already too late.

Only high-ranking priests and Holy Knights with verified skills, as well as divine power, could have been present in that place.

Those who could be considered the future of the Church saw me at that moment.

That meant that at least they knew I truly didn't want the Gate incident to happen.

"Do you understand now that I didn't make this choice simply to preserve my position?"

Although the lower-ranking priests and Holy Knights might not know, the top-ranking figures of the Church must have known the truth of the Gate incident to some extent.

Therefore, they must perceive me differently from how the world perceived me.

"Among them, Archbishop Rowan was particularly proactive in supporting you."

The high-ranking members of the Five Great Religions were gradually being filled with my followers.

Inevitably, there must have been a growing environment where more and more people were supporting me mentally, rather than the Empire.

The Popes wanting to side with me was not just their own judgment.

It was an inevitable choice. In other words, it was public opinion.

CHAPTER 605

I had grown accustomed to being hated and despised by those who didn't know me. I thought it was inevitable.

But this time, it was quite the opposite.

Those who didn't know me were worshipping and loving me. And this was happening within the Five Great Religions.

Just as Ellen was revered as a hero, they believed that I was the rightful champion of Als and Tu'an, even if the world hadn't recognized me yet.

Many had witnessed my final plea.

Among them were high-ranking clergy and holy knights belonging to the Five Great Religions. They knew that the Gate incident had been caused by my subordinates, but they also knew that I had never wanted this.

Therefore, it was inevitable that a faction supporting me would secretly emerge within the Order.

Rowan was a radical among them.

To begin with, if there were radicals, there must also be moderates.

If the moderates believed that the Demon King had his reasons,

Then the radicals would claim that the Demon King was absolutely right.

Both factions were predicated on supporting me.

Did this mean that, at some point, the majority of the upper echelons in the Five Great Religions supported me?

Did the popes act not out of betrayal to humanity but in accordance with the trend of the times?

Even Eleion Bolton, who had been busy with battlefield matters, spoke as if he was not unfamiliar with the situation. It was as good as settled.

The Five Great Religions had been waiting for me to appear, and had essentially become my support base.

"What is the argument of the radicals…?"

"They claim that the root of all these problems is not you, but the Empire and humanity."

Those who couldn't trust me.

Assuming that I had done no wrong, they argued that the responsibility lay with everyone who couldn't trust me.

"Some of them even wish for the collapse of the Empire."

In the end, it was the same.

They sought to hold someone accountable.

Only this time, it wasn't me.

Rowan was a person who revered me.

And she hated the Empire.

Such a person had tried to investigate the Empire's corruption, only to be hindered by the Holy Knights' commander, who even attempted to kill her.

"Rowan must have despised me for not being able to expose the Empire's corruption…"

The fire.

Someone had intended to show that scene to others.

To an unspecified number of people.

"Now, not only do I mistrust and despise the Order, but so does Rowan."

The radicals believed that the responsibility didn't lie solely with the Empire but with humanity as well.

This meant that the Five Great Religions couldn't possibly be entirely clean. After all, their ranks included holy knights, priests, and popes.

What if the sinister actions of the Tu'an Order, notorious for its poor reputation, had been revealed to the world? Actions like capturing civilians, torturing, and killing them in their temple?

Public sentiment would have run wild.

And the Empire wouldn't have remained silent.

Without people, there was no empire, so the Empire would have had no choice but to turn its sword against the Five Great Religions.

"Is it not an exaggeration to say that a civil war almost broke out in the Empire…?"

At my words, Eleion Bolton nodded.

"It's not certain, but it could have happened."

Rowan, from the start, was not only investigating this incident but fundamentally believed that the Empire bore all the responsibility. She was an Empire-blaming theorist.

Eleion Bolton must have deemed Rowan a threat and sought to eliminate him for that reason. Rowan would have wanted to bring down the empire if given the chance.

Therefore, it must have been the best option for the Holy Knight Commander to eliminate Rowan. If left alone, the friction between the Holy Order and the Empire could have escalated into actual bloodshed. Rowan was the type of person who would want to detonate a bomb instead of avoiding it, so Eleion Bolton's decision was not entirely unreasonable.

Leaving Rowan alone would lead to dangerous actions.

That's why they attempted to intervene, but their failure only made Rowan more dangerous.

It was absurd to expect Rowan to remain sane after the order she had been loyal to her entire life tried to kill her.

That must have been the meaning behind Eleion Bolton's words about needing me.

Rowan considered me a prophet, and by meeting her, I could resolve everything.

I needed to find Rowan.

Before she tried to do something I didn't want in the name of helping me.

Bertus led Ellen and her party to the underground research facility of Temple Magic University.

It was a horrifying sight.

They all watched the events unfolding underground.

Reanimated corpses and corpses in the process of being reanimated.

They saw where and what they were doing now, and how they were intended to be weaponized.

Not long ago, the Demon King had witnessed this scene. Now, Ellen, Ludwig, Louise, and Heinrich could see it too.

Everyone was at a loss for words.

Not only warriors, but long-dead heroes of the past were being resurrected as well.

They saw it.

"As I said before, I have no intention of abandoning this plan, no matter what you say," Bertus insisted after revealing everything, making it clear that he would continue with the project.

"So, from now on, if someone dies, you're going to keep bringing them back to life like this?" Ellen asked.

Bertus nodded at her question.

This carried significant implications.

Even if Ellen died.

If Saviolin Turner died, they would resurrect and deploy them on the battlefield.

This shouldn't be happening.

But in the end, what value does a corpse hold beyond its weight?

Shouldn't it be utilized if it can be of use?

"Was Asher… resurrected like this too?" Ludwig asked.

They looked no different from a living person.

If they could talk and remember just like when they were alive, wasn't that truly coming back to life?

Bertus shook his head at Ludwig's question.

"It failed."

"So… you couldn't really bring them back to life…?"

"That's right."

This was a half-baked resurrection at best.

Nothing more than weaponizing the dead.

It was impossible even to attempt with Delphin, as her body couldn't be found.

What if they could genuinely resurrect the dead, not only in their full form but with their complete memories as well?

This half-hearted resurrection made people cling to false hope because it succeeded in part.

Louis Ancton, Anna de Gerna, and Christina.

These three were the core members of the research.

Ludwig spoke quietly.

"I want to see him."

“…It's better not to."

As Dettomorian had said, finding Asher would reveal everything.

But they had not yet reached Asher.

"How did it fail, then…?"

They had not yet seen the full extent of it with their own eyes.

"I think we need to see it…”

Bertus sighed deeply, looking at Ellen and Heinrich, who seemed to share Ludwig's sentiment.

As it was not necessary for everyone to leave their posts when the Demon King arrived, the four of them observed the mages engrossed in their tasks in the underground laboratory.

Their attire did not reveal whether they were alchemists or dark mages.

Regardless, they were all intently doing their work with stern expressions.

If a single evil mage creates a dungeon and conducts horrifying experiments, then hundreds of mages are involved in conducting terrible research on a national scale.

In an isolated area of the underground laboratory, they encountered familiar faces.

Christina.

Anna de Gerna.

Louis Ancton.

"You guys… how…?"

Louis Ancton's face paled upon suddenly seeing the three visitors with the Emperor. Christina and Anna were equally surprised.

However, there was no need to be surprised about encountering them in an unexpected place.

There was only one port in the isolation zone.

"Is this… Asher?"

Ludwig stared at something in the port with a blank expression.

Other corpses had been restored to a seemingly intact state, but what lay before them could only be described as a grotesque mass of flesh.

Ellen's face turned pale, Heinrich's too, and Louise looked away, covering her mouth.

"What is… this…? This can't be Asher. What… what did you do? What is…?"

Anna and Christina were initially flustered by the sudden appearance of the others, but soon grasped the situation, knowing that Bertus had granted them access.

Christina had always maintained a cheerful demeanor.

But as if all of that was a mask, she shook her head firmly with a stern expression in the lab.

"It's not a success yet."

"What… did you say?"

"There are still many methods to try. Not long ago, it was able to speak. It just

repeated what it was told, but still… it could."

Anna and Louis bit their lips, watching Christina's attitude.

They had tried to bring their friend back to life.

But they had failed.

However, there was someone who would not admit defeat.

Inside the port was something that could hardly be seen as more than a trace.

Everyone saw it as a failure, but there was still someone searching for a possibility.

"Nothing is impossible in this world."

Reviving the dead halfway was possible.

So why would reviving them completely be impossible? Christina believed that she could do it.

An uncertain possibility drives people into despair and fosters false hopes.

Christina had lost her reason, immersed in that possibility.

"If you want to talk about failure, get out."

The Christina inside the lab was a completely different person from the one outside. In the face of the possibility that she might be able to reverse her friend's death, Christina must have kept touching Asher's corpse.

After failing, she tried again, approaching it in a different way.

And if that failed, she tried another method.

Again and again.

She believed that if she tried dozens or hundreds of times, she could eventually bring her dead friend back to life.

The result of those countless attempts had been this grotesque mass, so bizarre that it could not even be called a chimera.

And yet, Christina had no intention of giving up.

Anna and Louis had already accepted failure, but Christina couldn't.

Ellen stared at the mess with a stern expression.

It was probably impossible, but what if they succeeded?

Let's say they could revive the dead.

Would such a thing be allowed in this world?

Ellen couldn't make that judgment.

However.

She could tell that Christina, who had seemed fine at the garrison, had already fallen apart a long time ago.

If she were to die before the Gate incident was resolved, she might end up like this as well.

The ability to fight even in death.

Even after atoning for her sins through death, she could still be a source of strength to others.

Should she be grateful for that, or should she despair?

But she never wished to become a useless lump of flesh that couldn't help anyone.

Ellen couldn't bear to watch Christina desperately search for non-existent hope amidst this horrifying scene.

"This… This isn't right…"

This couldn't be right.

They shouldn't be doing this.

In the end, both the living and the dead would only experience pain and despair.

It was clear to Ellen that Anna and Louis were reluctantly by Christina's side, not to help with the research, but to try and stop her.

Bertus had also tried to stop Christina's actions but failed.

It had to stop.

If it continued like this, she would only go mad.

Find Asher.

Asher was found, but it was only a trace.

"Stop… This isn't…"

Ellen spoke the words everyone wanted to say.

Christina stared at Ellen, her eyes shifting to meet Ellen's.

"Why?"

As if to ask for an explanation, Ellen stared back at her.

"You know it won't work… You're only hurting yourself…"

In the depths of Christina's dark and bottomless eyes, Ellen could only see despair.

There was no way the eyes of someone truly searching for hope could be like this.

No one who truly believed in the possibility would have such a gaze.

They couldn't help it, they had to try just in case.

There was no way they would have the mechanical eyes of someone clinging to the only thing they could do.

Even if they succeeded.

Even if they spoke like Asher, even if Asher's memories were there, could it really be called life?

But if they managed to gain those memories in a clumsy way, if they could speak.

From that moment on, it would become something that must not be done.

Christina was trying to do that right now.

At Ellen's words, everyone remained silent but agreed.

The fact that Anna and Louis, who had witnessed this scene all along, were hanging their heads in sorrow was evidence enough.

They wished for Christina to stop now but couldn't bring themselves to say it, so they reluctantly helped.

Christina’s stubbornness was tearing her and the other two apart in real time.

At Ellen's words, urging her to stop, Christina's dark and bottomless eyes grew even darker.

"You."

“If it were Reinhardt who had died.”

“Wouldn't you try to resurrect him?”

“Just like I did for him.”

With that single sentence.

“…What?"

The mere mention of that name caused the air to freeze.

CHAPTER 606

No one dared to mention the Demon King in front of Ellen, let alone utter the name Reinhardt.

Everyone knew that it was Ellen's weakness.

Just now, Christina crossed that forbidden line.

‘Wouldn't you try to resurrect him, just like I did for him, if it were Reinhardt who had died?’

From her expression, from her gaze, it was impossible not to know that Christina already harbored resentment toward Ellen.

Nothing remained hidden in this dreadful laboratory.

Evil.

Hatred.

Loathing.

All the things that had been concealed were now exposed.

"Why would you say that?"

At Ellen's words, the corner of Christina's mouth curled up.

"You and Reinhardt had a special relationship, didn't you?"

"…”

"You still think that, don't you?"

Ellen's eyes widened, and everyone held their breath.

Everyone in the Royal Class knew that even hearing Reinhardt's name was painful for Ellen, and hearing about the inevitable battle with the Demon King was agonizing.

No one had ever provoked Ellen directly by bringing it up.

Christina was the first to speak so directly.

Everything they had been barely enduring seemed to crumble now.

Amidst the disgusting, horrifying, and appalling scene.

The boundaries of the truths they had pretended not to know shattered.

"Christina, calm down."

Bertus, unable to bear it any longer, approached Christina, but she shook her head.

"I heard a story not long ago."

Christina gritted her teeth and glared at Ellen.

"All of this happened because of just a few people."

"…"

"It wasn't entirely because of the Demon King."

"…"

"Do you have anything to say about that?"

Christina glared at Ellen, as if demanding an answer.

There were people who already knew.

But there were still those who didn't know.

Ellen was well aware that she had to tell a glaring lie for their sake.

“…No."

"Really?"

There were people in this room who did not know the truth.

Ellen could not know how Christina had learned about the story or the circumstances.

But she was certain that not many people should know about it.

"You're really shameless…”

"Enough."

As Christina tried to lash out again, Bertus stepped between them.

"Ellen, you've seen enough, haven't you? It might be best if you leave first."

"…”

Ellen remained silent, her lips tightly sealed.

"Lady Turner, please escort Ellen."

"Yes, Your Highness."

Everyone was thrown into confusion by the sudden tension and the incomprehensible conversation.

"Christina, it seems like we need to talk for a moment."

At Bertus's harsh words, Christina smiled and nodded.

"Fine."

Her attitude seemed as if she had been waiting for those words.

Ellen was led out of the Magic University by Saviolin Turner.

Until now, the only people who could discuss Reinhardt with Ellen were those who knew the truth.

That was limited to Charlotte, Bertus, and Saviolin Turner.

Yet, even broaching the subject was painful for them, so they avoided it.

But today, Christina suddenly brought up his name.

And she gave off an air that she knew everything about the matter.

There was no reason for Bertus to reveal the truth that others wouldn't appreciate knowing. Then how on earth did Christina come to learn that fact?

Did Louis Ancton and Anna know the truth as well, since Christina knew it?

And, was silence truly the right choice?

It wasn't difficult to see that Louise von Schwarz possessed a strong and unwavering character.

However, knowing the truth about the Gate incident was an entirely different matter.

It wasn't merely hypocrisy to cover up one's own sins, but a problem that, if misunderstood, could potentially divide humanity as a whole.

That's why they believed that remaining silent was the right decision.

Dark and obscure emotions welled up within, but they knew well that responding to Christina's words would be a mistake.

They tried to resurrect the dead and used the dead while they remained dead.

That must be a sin.

But without the Gate incident, there would be no sin.

So, wasn't the origin of all sins themselves, who committed the greatest sin?

They shouldn't judge something as bad, nor should they say something went wrong about someone else's mistake.

Wasn't it natural for Christina to suddenly react in such a way?

To Christina, who might think that if it weren't for them, Asher wouldn't have died.

They told her that Asher was dead and couldn't be brought back to life, so she should give up.

Hearing such words, she would have no choice but to be furious.

However, that wasn't the intended meaning.

It wasn't meant to tell her to stop committing sins anymore.

They said it because the matter was tormenting her, and it was ruining her.

It wasn't said to blame the sin, but because they didn't want Christina to get hurt any further.

However, knowing that Christina would be angry after hearing those words, there was nothing they could do.

With clenched teeth, Ellen had no choice but to follow Turner back to the dormitory in silence.

They couldn't learn what they needed to, but only learned about things they shouldn't have known.

Ellen, led by Saviolin Turner, left the laboratory.

Bertus took Christina, who seemed to know something but not fully, away to discuss something elsewhere.

So, in the isolation area within the lab, Ludwig, Heinrich, Louise, Louis, and Anna remained.

The break room of the isolation laboratory.

Five of them sat in an awkward silence, unable to speak.

No one could bring up any conversation.

Those who didn't want to show their vulnerabilities to others.

Neither those who saw what they shouldn't have, nor those who had their own reasons, could dare to speak a word.

Among them, Louise was the most deeply troubled.

She had decided to help Ellen, thinking that investigating Rowan's death might be dangerous for her.

However, according to the emperor, Rowan's death had nothing to do with the empire. Yet they came to know the empire's secrets that they shouldn't have known.

What troubled Louise was not the shock and fear felt in this scene, but the fact that she 'could see' this scene.

Louise couldn't understand that fact now.

Although the relationship between the empire and the kingdom was in name only, for a long history, the Schwarz Kingdom had always wanted to surpass the empire.

Louise knew that the royal family had such ambitions for generations, and the empire was also aware of that. For a long time, the empire had been keeping the Schwarz royal family in check.

At this point in time, when humanity faced a crisis, there was absolutely no intention to expose the corruption and decay of the empire as before.

However, once everything was resolved, this matter would become the empire's weakness.

Of course, it could be that the emperor had such confidence in the military power he secured through this matter that he left Louise to witness this spectacle.

But, was there a need to reveal such a weakness?

It would have been better not to show it.

The emperor seemed to feel no discomfort about Louise witnessing this spectacle.

To begin with, it was strange that she could enter the temple.

If she were the emperor, she would have stopped Louise from entering the temple in the first place. There would have been plenty of reasons to deny her entry.

‘Does it not matter that I see this spectacle?’

The emperor's intentions were unknown.

And the words Christina had just spoken.

Louise couldn't understand the meaning of her seemingly probing words about Ellen.

Heinrich's words to the Demon King inevitably came to mind.

There was something unknown to people about the Gate Incident.

The Demon King didn't want the Gate Incident either.

It was only natural that the emperor, Ellen, and Christina would know the truth about it.

Like Louise, who was lost in confusion, the others were feeling their own turmoil.

“Can we really… save Asher like Christina said?”

It was a cautious question from Ludwig, directed at the silent Anna and Louis.

“…”

“…”

Their silence and expressions already said a lot. Christina was clinging to an

impossible task.

“Black magic is involved. Magic that uses impure mana as its source… can't be a power for the living.”

Anna cautiously added.

“Restoration to a state stronger than when they were alive is possible, but… truly reviving them is unlikely.”

Anna, who had an incomparable understanding of black magic compared to Christina, already knew that Christina's desired outcome wouldn't be reached.

No one could say that if they knew, they should stop her. It was enough to guess that these two would have tried to stop Christina even without mentioning it.

“Become stronger…? Even stronger than when they were alive?”

At Ludwig's question filled with puzzlement, Louis nodded. With a slightly clenched teeth and a sinner's expression, bowing his head, Louis Ancton spoke.

“…Although they may appear alive, they aren't.”

“Like golems, like the titan… there's no difference.”

“The body is restored to the point when it was whole. It's not actually alive. So… it can be further enhanced.”

At Louis's words, Heinrich asked.

“Enhanced…?”

“You know that if you do Magic Body Strengthening before the magic circuit is fully in place, the body can't withstand the overload and breaks down.”

“I don't know how to do it, but…”

Heinrich said, looking at Ludwig.

“Right. It's incredibly… painful.”

Ludwig, who had spent days in agony after awakening the Magic Body Strengthening, vividly remembered the pain of that time.

“But pain is no problem for the dead.”

“Ah…”

The test subjects didn't feel pain.

Thus, beyond restoring one's body as it was in life, it was possible to enhance elements necessary for manifesting power within the body, such as magic circuits.

In doing so, one could surpass the limits of the physical body and life itself.

In other words, it was like modification. A level of power that could not be wielded in life could now be unleashed in death.

Strength that would be unbearable for the living could be granted. Though cruel to say, it ultimately became little different from handling an object. Therefore, the goal was simply to make a powerful weapon even more powerful.

These resurrected beings became stronger than they were in life.

Such an army was being assembled.

"Is a corpse absolutely necessary?" Louise asked. Upon hearing it, it seemed like a magnificent magic, save for the fact that it used corpses.

It would be perfect if not for the moral issue of using the deceased.

"Creating a homunculus might be possible. However, at this point, with that method…”

"We won't be able to mobilize within a short time frame."

"Yes…”

The homunculus experiment itself was a prime example of a taboo, so it couldn't be said that there were no ethical issues.

Was it inevitable that one would have to resort to taboos in order to overcome miserable times? If selling one's soul to the Demon could save the world, countless people would be willing to do so.

Perhaps it was inevitable.

There were those who had sold their souls to the Demon.

And they remained silent, witnessing others do the same.

The emperor said he had no intention of stopping it, and Louise could not help but realize that she should not interfere.

Did the emperor think that there would be no problem with her witnessing this scene because he knew that she could not stop it even if she saw it with her own eyes?

The answer remained elusive.

During that uneasy and sinful exchange,

"So, when you die, you become stronger…" Ludwig muttered blankly, staring down at the table.

His sudden remark made not only Louis but also Anna, Heinrich, and even Louise shudder.

"Don't think about such nonsense," Heinrich said sternly to Ludwig.

Everyone knew Ludwig still wanted to fight.

That's why his words ignited everyone's dark imagination.

The dead were being resurrected.

Moreover, they became stronger than they were in life.

Ludwig mumbled blankly.

"Right now, I'm useless."

Everyone knew Ludwig had been blaming himself, beyond just self-reproach.

"I couldn't do anything. I didn't catch the people who killed the priestess, but… I didn't play any role in coming this far either. I was stupid, thinking that there was something I could do. I was just satisfied with that."

Rowan died. And the culprit was still at large.

But Ludwig had not done anything to get this far. He had merely followed Ellen.

Was that all? From the beginning, Rowan was not the kind and noble person Ludwig had thought she was, but rather someone who kidnapped and killed civilians and tortured them.

Ludwig had been used by such a person, Rowan, without even realizing it.

There had been strange moments, but he never doubted them.

He simply thought he was helping to make the world a better place.

And eventually, he saw something that may or may not have been related to Rowan's death.

Magic that resurrected the dead. Magic that made them stronger than they were in life.

Such things should not exist in this world.

But Ludwig couldn't deny that this was necessary and that it could hasten the end of the war.

A useless existence.

Still, Ludwig said this with a bitter smile.

"It's alright. I don't wish for that. To want to fight after dying. I know that making such a choice wouldn't make anyone happy. It's just… because of the helplessness…"

Although he said that, everyone knew that Ludwig secretly wished for it.

There were people who would grieve and despair if he died. Hadn't they seen Christina's expression already?

He didn't want to become a corpse and return to the battlefield to help others or because he desired it.

As long as there were people who worried about him, Ludwig didn't wish for that either.

Everyone let out a sigh of relief after seeing Ludwig, who had briefly put them all in a tense mood.

"Don't say such strange things."

"I'm sorry…"

Heinrich was worried for a moment that Ludwig might suddenly be found somewhere having taken his own life.

And if Ludwig were to do something like that, it would be up to Anna, Louis, and Christina to bring him back.

Like what they did to Asher, their friends might be ruined in trying to genuinely resurrect him.

Ludwig had no intention of doing such a crazy thing or asking for it. It was just a possibility that had crossed his mind.

However, even when Ludwig said he had no such intentions, Heinrich couldn't help but feel anxious.

The desire to help someone, a character trait bordering on obsession.

He was gradually beginning to sense a twisted heart that didn't appear entirely benign.

Heinrich was an A-class student.

Relatively speaking, Anna and Louis, who had seen Ludwig up close, couldn't help but be more worried.

Ludwig was kind and considerate of others, but he sometimes engaged in actions akin to madness.

He might not have said that he wanted to fight even if it meant dying now, but who knew how Ludwig's thoughts might have changed later.

And they all shared the sentiment of not wanting to lose any more friends.

Louis Ancton stared silently at Ludwig and said,

“…Ludwig."

"Really, I won't think of anything like that. Don't worry…”

"I have something I want to show you."

Looking at Louis's determined expression, Anna nodded her head as if she understood what he was talking about.

"Something you want to show me?"

Ludwig couldn't help but feel apprehensive, wondering if he was about to see another dreadful scene.

"We're not just… working on reviving Asher here."

This place was a highly secretive part of the underground laboratory.

The three of them were doing different work from the other researchers, and Louis led the way, stating that their work wasn't solely focused on reviving people.

CHAPTER 607

In most areas of the laboratory, they were working on creating an army.

But that project had already progressed beyond development and was in full swing, with completed test subjects being utilized as a military force.

Christina was searching for a way to genuinely revive people.

Neither Louis and Anna, nor Christina herself, were solely focused on that research.

They were working on the next phase of the project, its applications, and everything that pertained to its further development.

In the isolation zone, there were other labs.

Ludwig, Heinrich, and Louise, tense with the thought that they might witness another shocking scene, encountered a sight they hadn't expected at all.

It wasn't a brutal scene, nor a horrifying one.

"A rabbit…?"

"Yeah, it's a rabbit."

Anna nodded in response to Heinrich's words.

It was a rabbit, quite literally.

The rabbit was inside a fairly large cage.

Five adorable rabbits were in the cage.

These adorable creatures seemed too out of place in this facility, where terrifying and horrifying experiments took place.

They watched the rabbits hopping around the spacious cage, seemingly captivated.

So what did that have to do with anything?

It wasn't as if they were suggesting watching the rabbits together simply because they were cute.

"Wait… something's off."

However, Louise noticed something strange about the rabbits.

While they looked perfectly fine on the surface, there was something slightly off about them.

Something was subtly different.

"Their legs seem… uneven…"

There was no denying the feeling that something was amiss.

"Now that you mention it…"

Ludwig, who had a keen eye, couldn't help but notice the oddity when Louise pointed it out.

"Their legs are of different lengths."

Louise finally noticed that the front and back legs of each rabbit were not balanced.

"That's correct."

Louis Ancton nodded.

"We've transplanted legs from other rabbits."

Ludwig's eyes widened at this revelation.

"And none of these rabbits have ever died."

This time, it was Anna who spoke.

"It's an experiment conducted on living subjects."

There were already three taboo subjects related to this project.

Necromancy, the dark magic of animating the dead as undead beings.

Then, homunculus.

Louise murmured blankly.

"Chimera, huh?"

"Yes, that's right."

And now, chimera.

The field of magic that synthesized only the strengths of various living creatures to create the ultimate being. Although it was mostly used in horrifying ways and thus deemed taboo, it wasn't necessarily required to be used in such a manner.

What mattered wasn't what type of magic it was, but rather how it was used.

Transplanting limbs from other creatures.

Everyone present knew what this meant.

A lost leg.

Or a lost arm.

These could be restored.

"Ludwig… this is a very basic magic among chimera experiments."

Compared to the taboo of replacing everything from the head to internal organs, transplanting limbs was a basic level technique.

Since their involvement with the taboo was top secret, they couldn't tell Ludwig that there was a way to restore his lost arm.

But now that Ludwig had entered the laboratory and seen everything, there was no need for them to hide anything from him.

Rather, now that they knew the secret, they could do for Ludwig what they hadn't been able to do before, despite knowing.

"I see…"

Chimera magic could be developed into a limb transplantation technique for those who lost their limbs in war.

Reviving someone was close to impossible.

But giving back someone's lost arms and legs was possible.

Instead of raising animals in the lab for no reason, they were experimenting to see if there was a way to restore Ludwig's lost limbs.

It was an easier task than creating an undead army.

Ludwig couldn't help but be excited by the prospect of regaining his lost arm.

This wasn't just beneficial for Ludwig. There were countless people injured due to war, just as there were countless dead.

Once all that was over, and post-war reconstruction began, it might not have been a dream for those who had lost their limbs to regain them. However, it would have only been possible after the perception of Chimera magic, which was forbidden, had improved.

Chimera could have been helpful to someone depending on how it was used. In the end, it all depended on whose hands wielded the power.

But the fact that they didn't mention the possibility of restoring Ludwig's lost arm wasn't only because it was forbidden.

"It will be painful."

"That's fine."

If he could get his lost arm back, he could endure any amount of pain.

Ludwig was prepared to endure anything for that alone.

"Ludwig, it's not just pain. You could die."

“…That much?"

"Chimera isn't regeneration, it's a fusion technique. You're transplanting a body part that wasn't originally yours. There could be rejection, and there could be shock."

Louis Ancton looked at the rabbits in the cage.

Ludwig could only intuit that there were failed subjects, as well as the successful ones that were alive.

"The endurance is on you. There's nothing we can do to help with that."

Ludwig was informed in case he chose an extreme method. If he could bear it, he could regain his lost arm through the Chimera procedure.

"I'll do it."

Ludwig nodded firmly, with a determined expression.

Now that he knew, there was no thought of hesitation.

"There's no reason not to do it if I can do more instead of just standing still."

He had touched the forbidden.

That's why Ludwig was able to learn about new possibilities.

"And my talent is physical stamina."

Since his only advantage was his robustness, he was confident he wouldn't die.

Ludwig nodded resolutely.

Louise looked at Ludwig and the others.

Applying Chimera research to make limb transplantation possible was considered a

shocking yet valuable endeavor.

And the one person who was missing from this place, whom the emperor had taken away to talk to.

This lab was obviously the most important area.

So it was clear that the three of them, former second-year Temple students, were at the heart of this research.

There were still unresolved issues, and the mystery remained unsolved.

But it was clear that what was being researched in this lab went beyond the gruesome and cruel, as they were dealing with extremely powerful magic.

The base was dark magic.

On top of that, the research on Homunculus and Chimera was being applied in a complex manner.

And then, on top of that, the limb transplantation technique utilizing chimeras.

'How on earth can these kids do so much?'

It wasn't just a single field of magic but a complex one.

And they weren't just assisting in the research; they were clearly core members.

There was an absolute limit to the time available.

‘Why are these kids, who have barely turned twenty, able to do and accomplish so much?’

Louise couldn't shake off her completely different set of questions.

And, it was not regeneration but transplantation.

'The transplanted arm… '

It probably wouldn't be from a living person.

Louise kept recalling Dettomorian's words.

The ominous boy had said that if he continued to chase this matter, Ludwig would eventually die.

The words kept swirling in her head.

As you know, I was a person familiar with numbers.

Numbers could tell you a lot, assuming there was someone who could read them. So, I had been learning how to decipher the meaning behind numbers for quite some time. In fact, that was pretty much all I had been doing.

But you see,

Nowadays, the world had become easier for people who didn't know numbers.

As you know,

Those days, numbers only seemed to decrease.

This time it was how many regular soldiers, how many superhuman-level individuals capable of Magic Body Strengthening, how many master-class fighters, how many mages, and how many holy knights. How many in each refugee camp…

Died.

How many cities in which country, or how many countries, or the remaining food supplies, supply routes…

Destroyed.

That was the kind of numbers I saw.

Numbers that only decreased didn't require painstaking analysis.

The situation was worsening.

Yesterday's situation was bad, and today's situation was worse.

Knowing the worsening situation in more detail didn't change much.

The only number that brought joy when it decreased was the number of remaining warp gates. Fortunately, that number had now decreased to a countable level.

The situation was getting worse and worse.

It seemed impossible for it to get any worse, but such a situation wouldn't come unless humanity disappeared altogether.

Gates endlessly spewed out monsters, and there were limits to the surviving humans.

What happened when there were no more people who could fight?

Wouldn't that truly bring about a situation that couldn't get any worse?

I didn't lose sleep every night because I had plenty of mages around me who could force sleep to come.

Anyway.

Those numbers.

Combat power.

People who could fight.

Those who could still wield weapons.

Their absolute numbers were decreasing, and there was not enough time or resources for people to grow.

The numbers that had disappeared.

Dead people.

Dead soldiers.

Dead knights, dead mages.

When you proposed that you could quantify those vanished numbers back onto my list of documents as combat power, I hesitated a lot.

Of course.

It wasn't because I thought it was something that shouldn't be done.

No, it wasn't that I hadn't done it at all, but it seemed like I had only done it briefly. Just briefly.

The reason I had so many concerns was:

It would have been great if it worked.

If it did, there would have been nothing more to wish for.

But was it possible?

If it was possible:

Then what was next?

Yes, what was next?

I was worried about the things that would follow.

Let's assume it worked.

Let's assume the Gate crisis ended.

What would happen then?

I thought about it, but I couldn't figure it out.

So, I gave up worrying.

First, let's see if it worked or not. So, when I saw your results, I had such doubts.

More fundamental doubts.

Could it be possible:

In such a short time:

To accomplish it so perfectly?

Adelia also succeeded in creating a Titan, but as you know, Adelia didn't create the Titan alone. Like you, Adelia was a genius.

Ultimately, it required the concentrated technology of the Golem from Saint Owan Duchy.

In the first place, the Titan wouldn't have been created without the Grand Duke of Saint Owan, the ruler of the Empire. Could Adelia have designed the Titan on her own?

It might have been possible, but it would have taken quite a long time. Adelia said it would take more than 10 years because of her near-masochistic modesty. Of course, some might say that was still too short.

Now:

Although I've done many bad things, had many evil thoughts, and engaged in many unsavory activities:

The Empire did not invest in dark magic. As you already knew, we didn't dabble in wicked power.

In this very special situation, being cornered, it was human nature to reach out reluctantly, and I knew it was my nature too.

Soon, the knowledge of the Empire wasn't much help to you.

With three geniuses of Adelia's level, could it have been possible?

Yeah, maybe.

A while ago, I had a brief conversation with someone who knew about this issue.

They had worried that I might have teamed up with some dangerous people.

I had said this:

"As far as I know," "I haven't" teamed up with such people.

I didn't know if the other person understood my words well.

I didn't team up, but someone else might have, so I couldn't be certain.

However:

Listening to what you just said:

I realized that I didn't know.

Where you heard it:

I didn't know how you found out:

But I was good at silencing people, so it couldn't have leaked from my side.

So, it seemed like you found out from somewhere else. Then, the number of candidates was greatly reduced.

So, in the end, I had lied at that time.

Christina.

Let me ask you one thing.

Emperor.

"It seems like it's not me, but you, or the three of you, who joined hands with the Black Order."

Bertus de Gardias asked, looking at Christina.

"Right?"

Christina noded her head, looking at Bertus.

"Yeah. That's right."

"Is it just you? Or does it include the other two who aren't here?"

At Bertus' words, Christina shruged her shoulders.

"Who knows? What do you think?"

Bertus fell silent at her noncommittal attitude.

Christina might have joined hands with the Order alone, and it was not certain whether the other two know.

However, Bertus was certain the other two would know as well.

Accepting the truth he had suspected, Bertus gave a slight nod.

Christina had been in contact with the Black Order, and somehow had recently learned the truth.

Her sudden change in attitude towards Ellen was evidence of this.

"Yes… The research is complete, and we have secured enough data and blueprints. Even without you, the Empire can maintain the project," Bertus said, folding his arms.

"You hear stories like that all the time. Discarding a loyal servant, abandoning a hunting dog once the hunt is over, that kind of thing."

"…"

Titan was created by combining the knowledge of the Saint Owan Empire and Adelia's genius.

The Homunculus Undead was also created by combining the knowledge of the Black Order and the genius of the three.

Both the former and the latter could be replicated now that the blueprints were

complete. This had been a field of study distinct from ordinary magic.

Thus, the blueprints were completed.

Christina and the Black Order were no longer of any use.

"However."

Yet, Bertus, who had uttered those words, furrowed his brow.

"You're not fools. You must have expected this."

If Christina and the other two had proposed and carried out this work solely for the Empire or humanity, there would be no need for a purge. They would be great mages who had achieved something extraordinary, even if it could not be revealed to the world.

However, the situation becomes complicated with the involvement of the Black Order.

Their intentions were unknown, so the necessity of a purge arose.

The Black Order must have known this, and so must have Christina and the other two.

"There must be some kind of safety mechanism."

It was unlikely that they would have carried out such a thing without preparing something for such an eventuality.

"You know it well."

Christina looked at Bertus and smiled.

It was a smile mixed with extreme anger, hatred, and malice.

Ultimately, only a very few people who knew the truth about the Gate Incident could understand it.

Some ended up hating everyone.

Even if it was not intended, there was no reason to forgive them.

Where was the reason to absolve someone who accidentally pressed the button that destroyed the world?

And it wasn't even a mistake.

What did the truth matter?

The number of people responsible has merely increased from one to many.

Where was the justification for them not to be punished simply because they were tragic figures?

If someone asked why those who committed ambiguous wrongs should have died,

What answer would they have to the question of why the innocent had to die?

In a world drenched in the blood and tears of those who did no wrong, why should their tears and blood be erased first? Shouldn't their tears and blood be the first to be shed?

No one could justify it.

No one was ignorant of the fact that nothing could be saved by death.

It was true that there was no need to add death to death.

But who could confidently say that such truths should enter the hearts of those who had been hurt and torn apart?

"If you tried to kill us, saying that we're useless now, I was going to tell you that it's actually the Empire that has become useless."

Christina spoke with hatred, anger, contempt, and murderous intent.

She expressed her desire for vengeance for everything that had happened.

Wasn't the Emperor doing this for a reason?

Didn't he say he had given it a lot of thought?

If this was possible, then what would come next?

It wasn't about considering the morality of resurrecting the dead.

"It's a matter of putting an army, which I cannot control nor suppress, in someone else's hands. It's inevitable that I would have my concerns."

“…You also know what the safety mechanism is?"

At Christina's slightly surprised reaction, Bertus chuckled.

"What else could the safety mechanism be but control?"

"That's true."

Bertus had long known that the moment the army was created and completed, it could not belong to the Emperor.

It was being created with unfamiliar technology. Therefore, Bertus already knew that he could not even control it.

He knew and yet he was deceived.

It was because he knew that he was deceived.

From the moment he faced the success of the first experiment, Bertus had been envisioning the consequences of completing this project in his mind.

The Gate Incident would end.

The sacrifices would lessen.

But the moment would come when he had to pay another price.

From the moment he decided to create the army, he knew he could not be the master of the Empire.

He knew it.

The project itself was a success.

But Christina was trying to bring the dead Asher back to life.

It wasn't the end. While making futile attempts, Christina had been improving the project itself.

If she could make the dead move as if they were alive and in perfect condition, and even make them speak.

Bertus was well aware that someone could do the same to him.

Resurrecting a dead knight would allow the use of the knight's power.

But inevitably, resurrecting a dead emperor would grant control over the Empire.

CHAPTER 608

Rowan was not dead.

She feigned death to buy time.

However, all of Rowan's subordinates were killed by the Holy Knights sent by Eleion Bolton. There might be a few survivors among them, but they would be a small minority.

If Rowan was planning something, what was she planning, and what could she possibly do?

Rowan disappeared.

But she couldn't have left the Empire, so she must be somewhere within it.

But where?

I have formed an alliance with the Five Great Religions, and although the Commander of the Holy Knights would be reluctant, he cannot defy the Popes and must cooperate with me.

"An encrypted document…"

"Yes, we're working on decrypting it now."

One fortunate thing was that not all of the records in Rowan's church had disappeared.

They might be related to the current situation, and they could reveal what Rowan had been doing so far. Right now, Eleion Bolton was in the process of decrypting the records recovered from the church's underground. Fortunately, there was no way the Inquisitors' records wouldn't be decrypted within the Holy Knights. It would just take some time.

Yes, that damned time.

"There's no guarantee that nothing will happen until that work is done."

Even if it was a document that could be decrypted, it was still a large amount of text.

Rowan must not take action until we could deduce what she could do from the meaningful truth within the massive amount of documents.

Was there enough time for that? Maybe, maybe not.

It was not impossible that Rowan wasn't scheming something but had simply gone into hiding.

"It's not like we can't predict what she's going to do."

Those were the words of the Pope of the Tu’an Order.

"What are you talking about?"

"In the past, perhaps, but now is not the time when heretics can be killed easily. Especially not by the hands of the Holy Knights."

"Even so, it seems like you're doing a pretty good job of killing them."

"…”

"No, I didn't mean to provoke you. It's just my way of talking. Come on, tell me what you mean."

There's no need to say something that would make the old folks angry.

The Pope was not wrong. Now that heresy has become the mainstream, it was impossible to completely eradicate heretics. Massacres were bound to occur.

"If we could annihilate them, it would be great, but they cannot be fundamentally eradicated. They keep emerging."

"I see."

"Neither extermination nor conversion was possible for the heretics who inevitably emerged."

"But if the Inquisitors were operating in the Empire, they must have been doing something, right?"

"If we couldn't stop the heretics, we at least wanted to know their scale. If there was a core, who it was, and where it extended to. Things like that."

It seemed clear that Eleion Bolton had never heard such a story before.

This was something happening within the Empire. It was evident that he had not been thoroughly informed about the internal affairs of the Empire until now.

I felt like I knew what the Pope of the Tu'an Order meant.

Bertus had said it before.

The organization of crime is inevitable.

The demand for the underworld must be met, and supply arises for that satisfaction, and the supply inevitably becomes organized.

Wiping out organized crime would only give rise to new organizations, so it was ultimately better to have control over them, he said.

At that time, Bertus had asked me if I had ever considered becoming the master of a thieves' guild.

Could this be the same situation?

The fundamental reason for the emergence of heretical factions was the distrust towards the Holy Order. As long as that distrust remained unresolved, capturing and killing the heretics could not be a fundamental solution. Inevitably, other heretical factions would arise.

Therefore, the Church leaders' choice was not to eradicate or remove the heretics.

It was to understand their scale and scope.

The emphasis was on meticulously grasping the heretical factions themselves. Even if they couldn't be eliminated, knowing their whereabouts would be helpful.

There were too many heretics.

So instead of eradicating them, they chose another approach.

Bertus tried to gain control over crime itself by owning a criminal organization.

Would the thoughts of the Church leaders be any different?

"Rowan had control over the heretical factions, especially the key figures."

There was no need to win the hearts of all heretics. If they could control the leaders of each heretical faction, it was as good as having everything.

Eleion Bolton looked at the Pope of the Tu'an Sect.

“…Are you saying that the Holy Religions are essentially the force behind both the heretics and the Hero Religion?"

"You could see it that way."

The times were chaotic, so the inquisitors of heretics were not working as they used to.

The Holy Religions were not judging the heretics, but rather holding them in their grasp. The Church leaders made that decision, and Rowan was the one responsible for it.

Rowan was, in a sense, the field manager overseeing it all.

She pursued dangerous tasks and was executed for defying the orders of the Holy Knight Commander.

In reality, Rowan would detest the faith of the Hero Religion as well as the Demon God Cult.

However, due to the inevitability of heretical factions arising, she had been working for a long time to grasp the strength of the heretical factions and control their leaders.

In this era, the one who could become the true master of the heretics was not

someone who could establish an all-encompassing faith and captivate people.

"Isn't this just like saying that Rowan is the owner of all heretical factions, just with slightly different wording? It's not exactly the same as being a leader, but isn't it something similar?"

If one could control all the heretics, wouldn't that make them the de facto leader?

Eleion Bolton decided that he had to kill Rowan, who was digging up the truth that could potentially cause a head-on collision with the Empire.

But he knew nothing about the actual threat that Rowan posed.

The Church leaders were cautious about giving too much information to Eleion Bolton in order to keep him in check.

Petty power struggles. And mutual fear.

Their actions were leading to catastrophe.

The world was so strange that the inquisitors, who should have been killing and converting the heretics, had become the true masters of the heretics.

And now, what would Rowan, who had been abandoned by the Holy Religions she had sworn loyalty to, do?

Rowan would be in the refugee village.

She would try to use the heretics for something.

That night.

Louis, Christina, and Anna, three second-year B-class students, returned to the dormitory after a long time.

It wasn't for a long-awaited rest.

Now that Ludwig knew the truth, they could do something for him that they couldn't

before.

The Lost Arm

It could be returned.

"It's not as easy as it sounds."

However, unlike the other two who said that returning the arm was a basic procedure, Christina immediately brought in Ludwig to convey a negative outlook.

Christina was talking to the emperor at the time, so she only heard later what Anna and Louis had said to Ludwig. That's why she had hurried back to the dormitory like this.

"I've heard it's painful. I've also heard about rejection reactions. But it's okay. I can endure it."

To regain the lost arm, to be able to fight again.

Ludwig wished that he could do something too.

Anna and Louis had already explained the issues like rejection reactions and pain thoroughly.

However, if he were to receive the Chimera procedure, it would inevitably be Christina who would perform it directly.

"Ludwig. That's not the problem."

"Not…?"

"Of course, in some cases, it can be easy. If it's just a matter of enduring… side effects and rejection reactions, and bearing the pain, that would be fine."

Then that should work.

As if she knew what Ludwig was thinking, Christina spoke while looking at him.

"They won't attach a rabbit, deer, or cow leg to you. What you saw was a rabbit. Not a

person, a rabbit. It was a procedure that cut off a living rabbit's leg, then cut off another rabbit's leg, and attached it."

“…Yes."

"Attaching a right arm to you through the Chimera procedure means cutting off someone else's arm and attaching it to you. Ludwig, is that still okay?"

"…!"

At those words, Ludwig's eyes widened.

It wasn't a simple issue.

Body parts aren't created.

The Chimera procedure originally made incompatible things compatible. Therefore, the new arm Ludwig would acquire would inevitably belong to someone else.

That was what Christina was telling Ludwig.

It was to cut off someone's arm and attach it.

"Of course, you wouldn't want that. But there are many failed restoration corpses in that lab. As you saw. It's not perfect. So inevitably, you'll receive an arm from one of the corpses that didn't resurrect after being restored. A dead person's arm."

"So… that's how it works…”

The new arm he would gain would naturally be someone else's arm, not his own.

He couldn't use a living person's arm, and the arms left in the lab belonged to corpses that failed to be restored.

"Covered in dark magic, alcohol, and enhancement procedures. It's not an ordinary arm. It may look like a human arm, but it's not a human arm."

It looked like a human arm, but it had already become something else that wasn't a human arm.

"Didn't you think the restored corpses looked too intact?"

"Uh…?"

"Most of them are warriors. People who died in battle. When you die in battle… most of the time, limbs are severed or crushed."

Only then did Ludwig realize that he hadn't thought about the flawless appearance of the corpses being restored in the vats.

There were no severed arms or legs; everything was being cleanly restored.

"If they could use such a technique on people, they wouldn't be transplanting another arm onto you, but regenerating your arm."

If they could regenerate a corpse, why couldn't they regenerate a living person?

He should have thought of that question first.

"A living person can't withstand the process. That's one of the reasons this magic is difficult to use on the living."

Christina's expression was filled with pain.

If regeneration were possible, there would be no need for transplantation.

Regeneration is not something that can be used on the living in the first place.

And what is regenerated cannot be attached to a living person either.

"Ludwig, if you ask, I might be able to attach an arm that isn't from a corpse. Do you want that?"

"No… No, I don't want to go that far."

Ludwig could never bring himself to do the insane act of cutting off a healthy person's arm and attaching it to himself.

"Ludwig, I won't say it's absolutely impossible. The important thing is, I don't know what the outcome of such a procedure would be. And I don't want to do it."

After finishing her words, Christina looked at Anna and Louis.

They were not lying, of course. If Ludwig underwent the Chimera procedure, he could regain his lost arm.

But only if it were the arm of a living person.

They mentioned the Chimera procedure because they feared Ludwig might engage in strange behavior.

They were not unaware of the risks.

But they mentioned the Chimera procedure because they thought Ludwig might try to end his own life.

No one knew if the person who receives the transplant could endure it.

Transplanting the byproduct of magic meant for the dead onto the living.

Ludwig could only wear a hardened expression as hope was given and taken away.

Seeing his expression, Christina bit her lip.

"Ludwig, if you really want to do it… I can do it for you. But if you die… I won't revive you. Never."

He might think of wanting to fight as a resurrected corpse if he died during the procedure.

That's why Christina firmly drove the point home that Ludwig should not attempt the procedure with the intent to die, unlike Asher.

"I under… understand."

In front of a dazed Ludwig, Anna and Louis could only hang their heads with heavy expressions.

CHAPTER 609

Deep underground, like an intertwined burrow.

In a space that should actually be called a tunnel, a faint, dim light flickered.

The deep underground tunnels were filled with the stench of rotting corpses and strange idols.

Somewhere deep within the tunnels, at the deepest point.

A woman sat in the center of the cavity.

People surrounding her, lying on the ground, were listening intently to her story.

‘Do you remember the day the sky opened up?’

‘I saw that spectacle with my own eyes.’

‘Do you know what my first word was at that time?’

‘Wow.’

‘Hard to believe, but it's true.’

‘It might seem wrong to say such a thing after seeing that, but honestly, it was amazing.’

‘When you see rain made of light falling from the sky, even if it falls on your head, you can't help but admire it.’

‘It was so overwhelming.’

‘And it was such a despairing sight.’

‘Judgment, I suppose.’

‘Yes, it was judgment.’

‘The judgment of light falling upon sinners.’

‘The judgment of heaven falling upon sinners who failed to recognize the prophet, tortured and threatened him, and tried to kill him.’

‘Lightning struck the ground, and warp gates that once benefited people must now be removed from the world.’

‘I saw the Demon King for the first time that day.’

‘He looked so sad.’

‘So very sad.’

‘His eyes seemed to have given up on everything.’

‘No one believed in him, and he had failed in everything.’

‘Yet, the Demon King spoke.’

‘He desperately told us how to deal with the upcoming events and how to resolve these issues with less bloodshed.’

‘The demonic seed was struggling to survive, threatening that various events would occur if it wasn't released.’

‘Everyone had no choice but to think that way. I also thought so at the time.’

‘However, the Demon King's words were true.’

‘We had to pay a heavy price for our sin of not recognizing the prophet.’

‘I was one of those sinners.’

‘Although many people inevitably died, how many could have survived because of the words the Demon King spoke?’

‘As countless as the dead were, so too were the survivors.’

‘People don't know the Demon King's kindness. They don't even try to know.’

‘Those who know the Demon King's kindness don't tell others. They don't even think about it.’

‘Isn't it strange?’

‘Good children should receive rewards, and bad children should be punished.’

‘Why did the kindest child in the world have to become the child who committed the worst act, and be known as the worst child in the world?’

‘It's strange.’

‘It's wrong. That's what it is.’

‘The world is like that, so good people can't receive rewards, and bad people take everything. I know that there's such a saying because of that.’

‘Even though it's not true, let's believe it that way.’

‘We should live kindly, thinking that the gods might pity us and give us something.’

‘Even if we can't enjoy glory while living, we might enjoy it after death.’

‘That's why there's a saying that we should live kindly.’

‘It's all a bunch of lies.’

‘You all know it.’

‘If the good deeds we accomplish while alive aren't rewarded, then they simply aren't rewarded.’

‘If the good deeds we try to do while alive turn into bad deeds, then the world is just wrong.’

‘The Demon King's minions had been the ones who caused the Gate incident, so perhaps the Demon King had been in the wrong.’

‘But could it truly have been said that the fault lay solely with the Demon King?’

‘If only they had trusted the Demon King.’

‘If those with power and authority had listened to the Demon King's words, even just a little.’

‘None of this would have happened.’

‘But no one knew that.’

‘This couldn't be right.’

‘To place all blame and punishment on a single person.’

‘To keep it hushed among themselves.’

‘Someone had been a hero.’

‘Someone had been an emperor.’

‘Someone had claimed to be a Holy Knight Commander.’

‘A pope, they had said.’

‘They had claimed it was all for the sake of humanity.’

‘For the sake of the people.’

‘But they shouldn't have been swaggering around.’

‘All sinners themselves.’

‘Placing all the blame on them, saying they were the ones people should hate.’

‘Because if people started receiving hate as well, the world might collapse.’

‘Forcing the Demon King to bear all the burden for such a petty reason.’

‘That was… ’

‘Too unfair.’

‘Too infuriating.’

‘Sad.’

‘And disgusting.’

‘The reason I had been saving all of you until now was that I thought there might be at least one thing we had in common.’

‘The Demon King had done no wrong.’

‘The Demon King had been right.’

‘The world had been wrong.’

‘We had been wrong, too.’

‘You who believed in the Demon God had been wrong.’

‘I, who had realized too late that the Demon King was a prophet and started to believe in him, had also been wrong.’

‘But did wrong people get born in a wrong world? Or did they become wrong because they lived in a wrong world?’

‘I wasn't sure.’

‘But I knew one thing.’

‘Mistakes must be corrected.’

‘That's why I had been educating you so well up until now.’

‘I was sorry for getting a little rough at first, but after you started listening to me, I didn't hit you or stick needles under your nails.’

‘I had been tolerant of you believing in the Demon God disguised as the Hero Religion.’

‘Of course, it had been because the Demon God Cult, which believed in the Demon King, had been better than the Hero Religion.’

‘Anyway.’

‘The veil that had hidden the truth had been covering reality for far too long.’

‘The days when sinners had walked the world pretending not to be sinners had been far too long.’

‘That saying, that truth was worthless before reality.’

‘That there were things that should be buried.’

‘That there were sins that should be overlooked.’

‘That reality was harsh, so there were truths to be buried, people to be sacrificed, and people and groups who should avoid responsibility.’

‘I had heard it so much that my ears hurt.’

‘So.’

‘I didn't want to hear such ear-piercing words anymore.’

‘The empire and the holy orders, which had lost their legitimacy long ago, no longer existed for humanity's sake.’

‘They were all just excuses, and they were just monsters existing for their own sake.’

‘Those words telling us to stay still, to be patient just a little longer, to think about it after all this passed.’

‘I wouldn't believe them anymore.’

‘The world would remain as it was.

‘It wouldn't change.’

‘The words telling us to endure would continue forever.’

‘In that case, I would change it now.’

‘Changing it seemed better.’

—---

Rowan, with cold, determined eyes, spoke to those who had prostrated themselves.

"Stand up."

The prostrated ones rose to their feet.

"Let's show them the real reality."

"To the group that had turned a blind eye to countless sins, lied, and deceived people."

"Let's show those who endured in silence just how sick the world has become."

"When chaos of an uncontrollable scale breaks out."

"The moment they paid for the sins they had committed thus far."

"I want to see the expressions on their faces."

"I think it's time to sprout the seeds of division that have been buried under the pretense of a petty cause, under the pretense that humanity must now unite."

Rowan knew that if killing the heretics only made them grow like weeds, it was better to grow trees.

Rowan did not hunt the heretics.

She couldn't help but know from the start that the heretics in the refugee camp were not the culprits of the bone theft incident.

They couldn't have done something she hadn't ordered.

That's why she easily reached the other masterminds behind the empire.

Rowan raised the heretics as trees and had their masters in her grasp.

Obedient slaves, who could no longer think of anything but submission after enduring torture and pain for a long time, were the masters of those trees.

"So now you don't need to live as heretics anymore."

"It must be the will of the gods."

"I believe so."

Therefore, she did not believe in heresy, yet she was the master of all heretics.

I knew where Rowan was. It's just that the range was too wide.

I would soon find out who Rowan had captured. However, most people in the refugee camp didn't have proper identities.

The high priests issued orders, and Rowan carried them out.

But the high priests didn't know about the extensive heretic forces in the refugee camp and their individual leaders in detail.

They left it to Rowan, thinking she would handle it.

But now that the information had become important, they had to find it.

It was not a time-consuming task.

At most, two days, and at the longest, four days.

That should have been enough time to find out where Rowan was.

But time was never given as needed.

Destruction was sudden.

Just as the world had come to this after the sky suddenly opened, the gates suddenly

opened, and the situation turned like this.

The reason for destruction was insignificant.

A few misunderstandings and overlapping incidents led to destruction.

The trigger was often not that remarkable.

-Kill! Kill them!

"…”

I was watching a building in the refugee camp burn.

Many people trampled on the fallen corpses, throwing them into the fire.

It was a common sight.

Murders frequently occurred in refugee camps.

But this time, the direction was different.

The refugees killed the guards.

They stole the guards' spears and stabbed their corpses.

The burning building was not a shanty in the refugee camp.

The guard headquarters was on fire.

In the falling snow, I watched the refugees, filled with revenge and madness, set fire to the guard headquarters.

Revenge for the persecution and oppression they had suffered so far was unfolding.

It took only a small act of violence to unleash a torrent of hatred. The guards were also mere humans.

The moment they realized that their violence wasn't absolute, the collapse of this flow was inevitable.

A large-scale riot broke out in the refugee camp of the Imperial Capital.

They killed the guards and set fire to the guard headquarters.

The beginning was easy.

And the moment it began, the initiator themselves could not have controlled the enormous flow of vengeance.

"Your Majesty. We must suppress this."

The emperor listened with a stern expression.

In the refugee camp district, massive riots had erupted, killing guards and setting fire to the guard station.

At first, it was a minor incident. But whoever had initiated it knew that once the hatred towards the guards exploded, it would continue on its own.

The number of guards in the refugee camp was minuscule compared to the entire population. They were somehow controlling the refugees, but once that failed, the people would no longer tolerate it.

It didn't matter who started it.

Everyone had turned their backs on the guards. All they needed was an opportunity.

By turning their backs on the guards, they were also turning their backs on the empire.

If left unchecked, the refugee camp would become a lawless zone.

And the boiling hatred wouldn't end with attacking and killing the guards and burning down their headquarters.

What if that anger turned towards the imperial palace?

What would they do then?

The empire had long been a sandcastle on the verge of collapse.

The gunpowder was ready, and no matter what the fuse was, it was waiting for a moment to ignite and explode.

As long as they could not feed the refugees.

As long as they could not alleviate their cold and hunger.

As long as they could not provide even the most basic safety and comfort.

It was just a matter of time before it happened. The problem was always the gunpowder, not the fuse.

But the empire could not collapse.

It must not.

Not yet.

It absolutely could not.

"Very well…"

The people had been oppressed by the fear of the guards.

The riot erupted only when hatred crossed the threshold of fear.

They could not provide bread.

Because there was none.

They could not provide everything the starving, angry mob needed.

There was only one thing the empire could give them.

Fear.

"Deploy the army and the knights. Execute everyone involved in this situation."

The only thing that could suppress hatred and rage.

Fear.

And the violence that evoked fear.

Regrettably, the empire was not wealthy, but it was strong.

Stronger than ever.

Could a country that did not protect its citizens, but rather killed them, truly be called a country?

Of course, it could have existed.

As long as a country had the violence to sustain itself, it could have continued to exist regardless of its legitimacy.

Massive riots had broken out in the imperial refugee camp.

Guards had been killed, and the guard station had burned down. The guards had retreated en masse to the imperial city.

For a moment, the refugee camp had become lawless.

But that violence had not solved everything.

The angry mob had needed to redirect their rage somewhere and had had no choice but to find a scapegoat.

But that had been temporary.

Bloodshed had ensued.

The empire had deployed a large army and holy knights, destroying any place that had shown even the slightest sign of violence.

The holy knights, composed of superhumans, could single-handedly massacre

hundreds of people without mercy.

Furthermore, when the monster-slaying task force was deployed to suppress the riots, the uprising was quelled in no time.

The swords and spears that killed monsters were even more effective against humans.

Violence born from rage had no choice but to cower before the relentless brutality that was almost impossible to resist.

The riot was brief.

Thousands of guards were killed.

But within just a few days, hundreds of thousands of refugees were slaughtered.

The empire had trampled on the burgeoning frustration, asserting that violence belonged solely to the state.

Fear subdued and repressed everything.

But ultimately, all legitimacy vanished.

Everyone knew that it was a lie that the empire existed for humanity.

The brief riot returned as a massive massacre, and the raging mobs were forced to hold their breath, overwhelmed by fear.

While the empire couldn't support the refugees, they could kill them all within days.

Overturning the empire through riots was impossible.

The truth hardly mattered.

People still hated the Demon King.

Only one thing had changed.

People hated the empire as well.

What was the difference between the Demon King and the empire?

Although people held their breath, they began to whisper to each other in hushed tones.

CHAPTER 610

Only a few days had passed.

In just a few days, too many things had happened.

A sudden uprising.

A sudden massacre.

"The fate of the empire has been sealed," Louise said quietly, sitting on the terrace with Heinrich.

"Sealed, you say?"

"Do you think a nation that is shunned by its people can survive?"

"The empire is strong, is it not possible?"

"It could survive, but only until its legitimacy loses meaning."

Louise gazed at the thickly accumulating snow.

"Legitimacy, you mean?"

At Heinrich's question, Louise nodded.

"You, too, must think that the empire's current actions are unavoidable."

Heinrich's eyes widened at Louise's words.

If the empire collapsed now, everything would be over.

That's why he thought that if the actions of the empire, the riots of the refugees, led to the overthrow of the empire, it could lead to the destruction of humanity itself.

Cruel and horrifying as it was.

It was true that he thought it was an inevitable event.

"That's legitimacy. It makes the actions acceptable, whether it's war, resurrecting the corpses of the dead, or massacres."

The Gate incident.

"Right now, the empire has an absolute and perfect reason called the Gate incident. That's why the empire can do anything to survive."

"Even a wicked act like resurrecting the corpses of the dead to create an army was acceptable because there was the reason of ending the Gate incident. No matter how cruel, how brutal, one absolute reason justifies everything."

"This is no different."

"The empire was able to thrust its sword at the people because it had the reason to end the Gate incident, which triggered this unrest amid people's justified fear and anxiety."

"What would have happened in normal times?"

"Creating an army with the corpses of the dead? It would have been a scandal across the entire continent. The empire would have been torn apart at that moment. Even I wouldn't have accepted the empire as the ruler of the continent if it had been a normal time. Not just refusing to accept it, but taking the opportunity to destroy the empire."

"Massacring people because of the uprising? It could have been done. But there would have been a price to pay."

"The empire is staking too much on the absolute legitimacy of the ending the Gate incident."

"It's deferring all the consequences to the future."

"Someday, this price must be paid."

"When the Gate incident ends, all legitimacy will vanish."

"The people may still be powerless, but they will hate and resent the empire."

At Louise's words, Heinrich shook his head as if he didn't understand.

"Just because people hate the empire… is it possible for the empire to fall?"

"No, it's not the people who bring down the empire. Legitimacy is not for the weak."

"Then what is it?"

"Legitimacy is a justification for those who hold power, those who have strength."

Legitimacy is meant to be exploited in the first place. Legitimacy is not prepared for the insignificant.

"When the Gate incident is over, another legitimacy will emerge."

"Another legitimacy?"

"The legitimacy that says the empire must disappear."

Heinrich's eyes widened at those words.

"A nation that creates an army using the dead, commits countless civilian massacres, and is even incapable of supporting its own people."

"And now, people hated and despised the empire."

"It means that eventually, someone else will take the place of the Gardias royal family."

"No matter who sits in that position, people won't miss the empire. There's already too much hatred and anger built up."

The hatred and anger people felt towards the empire became justification.

However, the masses couldn't topple the empire.

Someone with power, someone who possessed it.

When that person used the justification to swallow the empire, people would support the new empire that replaced it.

Justification was both the reason and the basis.

The basis that people wouldn't resist the new power when it appeared.

As long as the empire was despised, people wouldn't resist anyone who took the empire's place.

"I used to imagine the empire crumbling quite often…"

Louise gazed quietly at the scenery. It had been the long-held dream of the Schwarz royal family to overcome the inferiority they felt towards the empire and become its master.

But now that the empire was truly on the verge of collapse, Louise von Schwarz found the situation not as satisfying as she had thought.

The empire was accumulating debts.

Someday, it would have to pay the price.

"Interesting."

Louise exhaled.

"Regardless of who it is, if they're hated, then maybe anyone can sit in that position…"

"What do you mean?"

"Let's say people hate the Gardias royal family. They already do."

"Yes…"

"Wouldn't it be the same if the Demon King sat in that position?"

"…Yes?"

At Heinrich's dumbfounded response, Louise chuckled.

"Rather, since they haven't experienced the Demon King, they might think it's slightly better than the already-worst empire."

The empire was showing nothing but the worst of the worst.

They hated the empire and the Demon King.

However, they hadn't experienced the Demon King yet.

So they might think it's a little different from the empire, that it couldn't be worse than what they already deemed the worst.

"Whether it's someone who receives everyone's support or another worst-case scenario in an already worst-case situation, there's no reason to refuse either."

If it's the best and the worst, people would reject and refuse the worst and want the best.

But if it's the worst and the lesser evil.

People would want the lesser evil.

The empire was the worst. It was heading towards the worst.

So it didn't matter who sat there.

It didn't matter who took it away.

If they had the power to do so.

"Now I think I understand why I was able to enter the temple…"

With that, Louise took a sip of the cold, stale black tea.

'The emperor is digging his own grave… '

Digging a grave.

Not unknowingly, but knowingly.

"Is it not ready yet?"

"Yes, we need a little more time…"

Eleion Bolton couldn't hide his impatience as he watched the numerous priests wrestling with documents in the Holy Knight Order's headquarters.

All the priests who could decipher the code had been mobilized, but the progress had been painfully slow for an extended period.

Eleion Bolton, unable to bear the sight of the busy scene, stepped out onto the terrace.

Outside the tall temple of the Holy Knight Order, the snowy landscape still stretched out.

The excessive snowfall had long since become a serious problem for the refugee camp.

The snow was falling too heavily.

However, the bigger problem at hand was what was happening among the people.

The situation in the refugee camp had reached an extreme, and the Empire's response was equally extreme.

Naturally, he instinctively knew that this situation had something to do with Rowan.

This was only the beginning.

Instead of collapsing on its own, the Empire chose to cut its own flesh.

There was no guarantee that the next thing to be cut would be flesh. Next time, they might have to cut bone or sacrifice something else.

Rowan needed to be found.

The fact that Rowan controlled the heretics scattered throughout the refugee camp meant that, in essence, the camp belonged to Rowan.

Desperate and exhausted people left with nothing but evil and hatred might resort to even more extreme actions.

The riot had been quelled with violence, but the next riot would be on an even larger scale.

'What difference would it make even if we found her?'

What had happened couldn't be undone.

Just as the Gate incident couldn't be reversed, neither could the refugee camp riot and the Empire's massacre.

Even if Rowan was found and the heretics eliminated, the chaos had already begun.

Finding the arsonist wouldn't change the fact that the fire had grown too big to control.

The arsonist and the fire had become completely separate issues.

While they could prevent Rowan from starting fires elsewhere, the fire that had already grown would spread embers on its own.

The only saving grace was that the much-needed Demon King had made contact.

Although it was bitterly miserable and infuriating that the popes had recklessly handed over the Holy Knights and the Five Great Churches, what was needed most at the moment was the Demon King.

Rowan was a follower of the Demon King.

Therefore, it was certain that she would absolutely obey the Demon King's words.

Just one word from the Demon King.

If they could relay a single message to Rowan telling her to stop her self-destructive actions, they could slow down the flow of madness.

However, they still needed to find Rowan.

They couldn't publicly announce that the Demon King had appeared in the Imperial Capital to search for Rowan.

That would be like causing a landslide to put out a fire.

Everything had to be done in secret.

Silently and covertly.

If they could inform Rowan that the Demon King had made contact and that the Holy Knights and the Five Great Churches had already sided with the Demon King, they could control the chaos.

Rowan had to be dealt with.

Eleion Bolton felt dizzy at the thought of the repercussions his decision had brought upon them.

He didn't know what the Empire was doing, but it was clear that they were involved in something dangerous and ominous.

Rowan, who hated the Empire, would undoubtedly cause trouble if she found out.

However, in the end, Eleion Bolton had fallen into a paradox, where he had caused even more dangerous problems in order to stop the dangerous ones.

The Demon King was waiting for information from the Holy Knights and was busy searching for Rowan in his own way.

But ultimately, the crucial information was inside the Holy Knights.

If they deciphered the encrypted documents, they could learn about the heretics' power and possibly locate Rowan.

However, that task…

The large volume of information about Rowan that had been collected over time made proper analysis impossible.

It had been several days already.

Nevertheless, there was time before the next chaos, as the chaos had already occurred once.

Even if they deciphered the encrypted document and extracted the information, it was natural for Rowan to know about the data she had left behind.

So, there were countless ways to render this information worthless.

Just one word would suffice.

‘The Demon King, whom you so greatly admire and follow, has already come to us.’

If only that one word could be delivered, everything would be resolved. But it was an impossible situation.

The Demon King's approach.

Only the Holy Knight Commander and the popes of the five major religions knew about it.

As the Gate incident ultimately occurred because of unresolved misunderstandings and lies, was Rowan now trying to turn the Imperial Capital into a sea of flames, not even knowing that what she had so desperately wished for had already come true?

Eleion Bolton watched as numerous priests rummaged through documents.

Some heretical inquisitors should have been spared.

If so, it would not have taken so long.

But it was pointless to regret it now.

If only the Holy Knight Commander hadn't been overly cautious about his excessive authority, intentionally not informing himself of what he should know.

Then this would not have happened.

The checks and balances of the popes and Eleion Bolton's excessive vigilance had

ruined everything.

Eleion Bolton glanced at the encrypted documents.

Having never served as a heretical inquisitor, Eleion Bolton could neither read nor had any need to read such encrypted documents.

Therefore, all the priests in the analysis room had either served as heretical inquisitors or were involved in related tasks.

To be precise, since Rowan held the position overseeing all heretical inquisitors, they had all been her subordinates.

However, since most of Rowan's direct subordinates who knew the core of this incident had died, the work progress was inevitably slow.

But really.

Was that truly the case?

Eleion Bolton looked at the priests in the analysis room, suddenly struck by a thought.

They turned pages, wrote something, and did something.

They were doing something.

Eleion Bolton quietly observed their actions.

They seemed to be doing something.

But the movement of their eyes.

The gesture of turning the pages.

An indescribable, strange feeling came from that.

It seemed like they were doing something, but not really trying to accomplish anything.

He felt such an odd sensation.

Eleion Bolton finally covered his face with both hands and let out a deep sigh.

'Damn it… '

How foolish.

He had been overly naive.

These people couldn't possibly be unrelated to Rowan.

And yet.

Why on earth.

Why did he believe that they would carry out his orders properly?

That the Holy Knights would act according to the commander's orders.

Why did he take that for granted?

Could one find a needle in a sandy beach?

Unless one had an incredible amount of time, it would be difficult. And now, not even knowing how much time was left, they were experiencing the feeling of their blood drying up in real-time.

This catastrophe, clearly related to Rowan, was heading toward some abyss.

I debated whether or not to use the trump card of revealing the Demon King's appearance in the Imperial Capital dozens of times a day.

An accident had occurred and a certain flow had begun.

It couldn't be stopped.

However, shouting at the top of my lungs for Rowan to come out on the main street

wouldn't help me find her, so I had no choice but to wait for information from the Holy Knights.

It was the same for Bertus.

Bertus had informed me what he had been doing and what he could do so far, but in the end, Bertus couldn't do anything other than block this catastrophe through the method of massacre.

If the situation became more extreme, Bertus might choose to sweep away the entire refugee camp.

Hundreds of thousands had already died in an instant.

The Empire, capable of controlling a Master-class security force, could make such a thing happen.

If the situation became even stranger, it would not be hundreds of thousands, but millions who would be massacred.

It would be death not by disaster or starvation, but by massacre.

I couldn't let that happen, but there was little I could do.

All I could do was gather more information, even if only a little, and reach Rowan a little faster.

I had to find a needle in a sandy beach.

I had to find it quickly.

Only by telling that demon-loving fellow that, since I had arrived, she should shut her mouth and watch would this madness stop.

Als Cathedral was too conspicuous a place.

And it was also dangerous to meet the popes directly.

So, I had them send a contact person to the designated meeting place.

The location was the sewer beneath Bronze Gate Tower.

The place where the Rotary Club had been.

As I headed towards the meeting place, someone who seemed to be a contact person was waiting for me in the corner of the sewer.

A woman wearing a tattered robe smiled brightly at me.

Her smile was a bit odd.

How should I put it?

It seemed overly delighted.

A smile that didn't match the current situation.

"Your Majesty, the Demon King."

And an overly familiar address.

I couldn't tell what had happened in this situation.

"Anyway…"

But I naturally realized.

Finding a needle in a sandy beach was impossible.

"But it seems like you're Rowan."

Was it possible for the needle to come to me?

CHAPTER 611

For some reason I couldn't fathom, Rowan was waiting for me in person.

What was going on?

Had the Popes deceived me?

Was there a reason for them to do so?

In a situation where the answer was uncertain, Rowan knelt before me.

"It is an immense honor to see you again, Your Majesty the Demon King."

That gesture signified complete submission.

"Why are you here? I clearly remember searching for you, but I don't recall telling you to come here. We're meeting for the first time, aren't we?"

“…I know everything that happens within the Five Great Religions."

Ah.

So that's what it was.

The Imperial Capital had its own unique environment.

Whether it was the Five Great Religions of the Imperial Capital.

Or the Holy Knights within the Imperial Capital.

At some point, it had ceased to belong to the Commander or the Popes.

Eleion Bolton didn't know, the Popes didn't know, Bertus didn't know.

And I hadn't known either.

"From the beginning, I should have met you, not the Popes, to absorb the Five Great Religions."

"It seems that way."

I had just met the right person to hand over the Five Great Religions to me.

"Those who share my intentions are all prepared to support you, Your Majesty."

Despite knowing there were many factions within the Order that supported me, including the Popes and the Commander of the Holy Knights, they were unaware that these factions had been sidelined for a long time after unifying.

The elite directly under the Holy Knights' Commander, who tried to suppress Rowan, wouldn't belong to Rowan.

But that was all.

The number of people the Commander could control by his own will was limited.

The remaining Holy Knights who followed the Commander were stationed at the allied forces' base.

The factions of the Imperial Capital were not the Popes', but Rowan's.

So now, the Holy Knights hadn't returned to their base, but were actually in enemy territory.

Rowan was able to handle not only the Hero Religion and the Demon God Cult but also the Five Great Religions within the Imperial Capital.

"It's an irresistible offer, I admit. But why should I join hands with you, who clearly don't seem to be in your right mind?"

It was evident from the conversation that Rowan wasn't a normal person.

"Do you think the Popes are sane?"

"They might not be, but they seem better than you."

No matter how sweet the promised fruits were, I couldn't help but be hesitant.

I had only come to stop the madness.

Rowan cautiously looked up at me.

It was a gaze that was difficult to endure.

It was a gaze that dared to look at me, feeling embarrassed even to do so, yet wanting to make eye contact and converse with me – that intention was clearly visible.

An awe that made my insides churn.

It was already uncomfortable knowing it was directed at me.

"Which is crazier: someone who uses heretics to incite a riot, or someone who plans to kill all heretics? Both are insane, but I don't know which is more so."

However, Rowan's words were more shocking than his gaze.

“…What?"

The former was Rowan.

Then, who was the latter?

"Didn't the Popes tell you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Didn't they mention the heretic purification?"

Heretic purification.

The chilling phrase made me feel as if my entire body was freezing.

"You don't really think that the five Popes only intended to observe after figuring out the scale of the heretics, do you?"

"Yes."

That's what had been said.

'Now' was a time when heretics could not be killed indiscriminately.

That statement ultimately implied that, when the time came when they could be killed indiscriminately, they would be killed without hesitation.

And through Rowan, they had been assessing the scale and leaders of the heretics.

They had initially attempted to control them because extermination was impossible.

And after all these events, they would have tried to eliminate them completely.

"Why try to put wine that's not even as good as vinegar into an old leather wineskin when they say new wine should be put into new wineskins?"

Rowan had almost been forced to perform penance.

And now, Rowan was talking to me about penance.

"Don't tell me you did all this to save the heretics?"

"I wish for the empire's downfall. And for the Demon King to become the ruler of the new era."

"…"

"Saving millions of heretics is just a byproduct of the Demon King's reign."

Rowan smiled with a peculiar expression.

It was a very awkward and bizarre smile.

"And no matter how skilled I am at killing and torturing people, it's sad when more than ten million people die, isn't it?"

"…"

"Such things shouldn't happen."

The heretic inquisitor said that a heretic's life was still a life.

It had an extremely unpleasant resonance, like a serial killer talking about the dignity of life.

And that unpleasantness came from the fact that Rowan's words were not wrong.

There was nothing more disgusting than a wrong being saying the right thing.

"Did the popes really try to kill all the heretics? And they thought the order would be safe after doing that?"

"Do you think it's impossible?"

“…What?"

"Isn't it a good thing for the empire if the number of refugees, who are not even worth as much as maggots, decreases?"

I couldn't help but widen my eyes at the chilling possibility.

"Do you think it's impossible to blame the incident in the basement of the Holy Knights for the heretics' actions and kill them?"

"…”

"It's a matter of whether they can handle it or not. If they want to, they can obviously do it, you know."

The incident at the Holy Knights was my doing.

But did the popes try to frame the heretics for it instead of finding the culprit?

"Could it be that the policy was set up that way from the beginning?"

“…They ordered me to investigate in that direction."

The popes wanted to control the heretics. That's why they used Rowan.

That's why the bizarre structure of the Five Great Religions being the mastermind

behind the heretics was established.

But in the end, the popes were only controlling the heretics because they couldn't kill them, and they would have pushed them all away whenever they could.

The popes wanted to make this incident a heretic crime, regardless of the truth.

But Rowan knew almost everything about the heretics in the refugee camp. Even if they captured and tortured the unidentified heretics, they would have known they weren't the culprits. They could have made them fake culprits, but they could never become the real culprits.

And then, she tried to approach the empire as the culprit.

There, Eleion Bolton ordered her to stop the investigation, but Rowan didn't listen.

It was clear that the popes were preparing to kill all the heretics someday.

Of course, it wouldn’t happen immediately.

The Popes had hidden their intentions from me. Of course, they knew I would react sensitively to words like "purifying heretics."

They were opportunists who swallowed the sweet and spat out the bitter.

Their attachment to me was probably because the public opinion within the church was flowing in favor of supporting me.

Had Rowan gone mad?

Or had the Popes gone mad?

Perhaps both were mad.

But now, it was clear whose hand I should take.

The atmosphere in the capital was ominous and chaotic, due to the recent riot and the massacre by the guards.

Smoke from burning corpses billowed everywhere, and the guards patrolling the refugee camp were not the usual ones.

Silent guards wearing helmets that hid their faces filled the streets, walking wordlessly.

In this atmosphere of hatred and rage towards the guards, no one dared to lay a hand on the solitary guards.

Everyone had seen that these silent watchers were a different caliber from ordinary guards.

These strange beings, who seemed human but not quite, roamed the refugee camp.

They used extreme measures at the slightest hint of violence.

It seemed as if unresponsive machines were patrolling the streets, reacting to neither words nor cries.

The guards now controlling the refugee camp gave no words and no warnings.

They slowly walked the streets, meting out summary executions at the first sign of unrest before disappearing leisurely.

People felt extreme terror at their inhuman appearance.

Days passed like this.

The four pursuing Rowan's death remained in the temple amidst the ominous atmosphere.

Each needed time to process the shocking truth they had discovered. Ludwig gained hope that he might regain his arm through the Chimera procedure, but he also knew that it could threaten his life, so he agonized over the decision every day.

The sudden chaos in the capital forced them to spend days of silence within the temple.

But they couldn't do so forever.

Ellen called Heinrich, Louise, and Ludwig together.

"I think we need to decide what to do now."

Ultimately, the fundamental problem remained unsolved.

Who killed Rowan?

The Emperor said that Rowan's death was not the work of the Empire.

"The possibility of Bertus lying about that is low. There was no reason to hide it if the Empire killed Rowan, especially after showing us the laboratory."

"That's true."

Louise nodded in agreement with Ellen's words.

They were shown a secret even bigger and more important than Rowan's death. Strictly speaking, the death of one priestess was trivial compared to what was happening in that laboratory.

If they had killed Rowan, they would have said it was unavoidable.

Since there was no reason to lie, logically speaking, it was highly likely that the Empire did not kill Rowan.

Dettomorian had said that they would know when they found Asher, but all they found out was that Rowan's death was not related to the Empire.

However, that didn't change the fact that they had learned something.

They could rule out one of the most likely factions.

"It's likely that Rowan's approach to Ludwig from the beginning was to investigate the Temple."

"Yes, that seems right."

"Then the Empire would have a reason to kill Rowan, as she discovered something she shouldn't have. But the Empire claims no involvement, and there's no reason for

them to lie based on the circumstances…”

The bandits' attack was never the case to begin with.

The faction that had reason to kill Rowan was the Empire, but the Empire hadn't killed her.

Therefore, the situation itself was trapped in a maze.

"Could it have been the heretics who killed her?"

Heinrich raised the question.

Rowan was initially an Inquisitor, so if the heretics knew of her existence, she would have undoubtedly been a target they would want dead.

"It's entirely possible that she wasn't killed while investigating, but was retaliated against for her accumulated deeds."

Ellen affirmed Heinrich's statement, as if unable to deny the possibility.

"But even so, the refugee camp is an understatement for danger…”

A large-scale riot had taken place, and the area had been subdued through a massacre. As a result, the refugee camp was not a place anyone would want to enter.

Massacre.

It was like a bolt from the blue.

Moreover, everyone present knew that the army being created to end the Gate incident was deployed to kill people.

Nobody was unaware that too much was being justified under the pretext of the Gate incident.

But even if it wasn't dangerous, it wouldn't be any different.

If the heretics were the ones who killed Rowan, they still wouldn't know where they were.

"By the way, initially… there was the incident at the Holy Knights' tomb."

Ludwig, who had been silent, finally spoke.

"Was that the Empire's doing?"

"Yeah."

"Hmm."

"…!"

Only then did everyone realize that they had not been considering the most immediate matter amidst the shocking truths.

CHAPTER 612

"It seems that the corpses there had come back to life as undead and escaped. That was our conclusion, remember? But what the Empire does is, they take the corpses and… revive them in that… enormous vat."

"Right."

"So… the incident that took place there initially had nothing to do with the Empire… At least, that's what I think… Sorry, I didn't mean to cause confusion, but that's what it seems like…"

"No, you're right."

As Ludwig trailed off, Ellen firmly shook her head.

"We don't need to ask Bertus to know. It's definitely a different case. And the Empire has no reason to rob the tomb of the Holy Knights."

Robbing the tomb of the saints.

Swapping the corpses at the national cemetery.

They were two separate incidents.

The methods were vastly different, and the Empire had no reason to meddle with the tomb of the Holy Knights in the first place.

"So, Rowan had been mistakenly targeting the wrong culprit and conducting the investigation."

But they were only trapped in another maze.

They had believed everything was the Empire's doing, but the Empire neither killed Rowan nor had anything to do with the theft at the Holy Knights' underground tomb.

So, Rowan had approached Ludwig to pursue the wrong culprit.

Of course, the scene looked enough like the Empire's doing, with similar incidents occurring.

But strictly speaking, they were different cases.

Then who were the ones responsible for the incident in the underground tomb?

Were they the ones who killed Rowan?

"Now, I really don't know what's what… I just can't figure it out."

Heinrich started pulling his hair in frustration.

"You don't need to worry about this anymore. It's not our responsibility to reveal the truth."

Those were Ellen's words.

"I had wanted to find out why Archbishop Rowan approached Ludwig and if she had any intention to kill me. But we've made some things clear. Rowan approached Ludwig, and her reason was probably to investigate the temple."

Not all the mysteries were solved, but they could let go of the case with the questions they had answered.

As they learned that Rowan was involved in many bad things, her death didn't seem unjust. She had done plenty of things that warranted death.

Karma, perhaps.

If someone had taken revenge on Rowan, it would have been a deserving fate for her.

Ludwig muttered weakly.

"Yeah, we don't need to know everything…"

The truth they already knew and had discovered was overwhelming enough. It was difficult enough to endure what was already happening.

Silencing and overlooking wrongdoings because of reality was painful enough.

Digging deeper into Rowan's case, which was now completely lost in the maze, didn't seem possible.

"But before we give up completely, there's one last place with potential."

Although Ellen said letting go of the case was okay, she looked at everyone and spoke as if it was truly the last chance.

"The commander of the Holy Knights told me. If the Popes try to hide something from him, he wouldn't know."

“…Right."

"And it's true that the commander of the Holy Knights was hiding something from me."

Ellen said calmly.

"We must find out what they were hiding, and even if it wasn't that, the Holy Knights were investigating the matter internally. If they had discovered anything, they might be able to share the information. If we couldn't get anything from there, we would end it here."

The last ones they had to visit.

Once more, to the Commander of the Holy Knights.

And to the Popes of the Five Great Religions.

They couldn't know if the truth they held was unrelated to the murder of Rowan.

However, if they couldn't obtain anything from there, it was time to dust off their hands.

The case could be considered trapped in a maze.

The Empire, a powerful suspect faction, hadn't committed the act; the only other possibility was the heretics. However, identifying the culprit among the heretics had

become nearly impossible.

Therefore, Ellen decided to visit the Holy Knights one last time.

But it was a sensitive issue.

"Commander, you don't have to help me anymore. You might get into trouble."

That's why Ellen told Louise that she didn't have to get involved any further.

"What's the point of that now? I'm going too."

Having already learned too much that they shouldn't know, Louise felt that she had to see it through to the end.

Could the secret of the Holy Knights be greater than the secrets held by the Empire?

Once again, the four of them left the temple.

They reached the Cathedral of the Holy Knights after walking endlessly on the Imperial Capital where the magical train had stopped.

"The Commander is not here."

With such a simple statement, the knights guarding the entrance blocked Ellen's path.

"Then I'll wait inside until he returns."

"He won't be back soon, as he's expected to be away for quite some time."

"…"

Ellen stared at the knights guarding the entrance.

Their attitude seemed strange somehow.

They had blocked their way when they tried to enter the burned church. At that time, they seemed genuinely troubled.

But now, something was off.

"Did he return to the Allied Forces base?"

“…Yes."

It was a lie.

There was no way Eleion Bolton would have returned to the Allied Forces base without properly resolving the incident that had occurred on the Imperial Capital.

Knowing that he wouldn't return without a proper understanding of the situation in the Imperial Capital, the gatekeeper was lying.

But why tell such a blatant lie?

And then…

Ellen looked around, not at the knight blocking her path, but at the surroundings.

The knights guarding the entrance were all watching Ellen.

Ellen and her companions.

Ellen approached the knight with a single stride.

"…!"

As Ellen approached, he stepped back.

It was a slightly different look from before.

"Why are you trembling?"

Despite wearing armor, the corners of his eyes, his face, and his fingertips trembled faintly.

It was the look of someone consumed by fear.

But why?

"We don't have to meet him right away. We just need to go inside. If the Commander isn't there, we can meet someone else."

The moment Ellen tried to pass by.

"You cannot enter."

"…"

The terrified knight blocked Ellen's path with his body.

They didn't know what had happened, but one thing was clear.

The absence of the Commander wasn't important.

Preventing Ellen from entering was what mattered.

"Get out of my way."

"…I cannot."

Ellen could vividly feel the extreme tension not only from the knight before her eyes but also from the other knights.

As the atmosphere gradually grew more ominous, the expressions of the other three waiting for Ellen to finish her conversation began to harden.

"It seems I've come to the right place."

Looking at the frightened knight, Ellen shook her head.

"It seems you want to see if I can break through with force. If you want to know, try blocking me again."

Ellen took another step toward the entrance of the Cathedral.

This time, the gatekeepers could not stop Ellen.

* * *

Ellen entered the Cathedral.

The knights who failed to stop Ellen stared at her retreating figure with hardened expressions.

“…Something's strange."

However, a very peculiar sight unfolded in the Cathedral.

She had entered with the thought that something was definitely there.

"Why are there… no people?"

Just a few days ago, there were many knights and priests roaming around.

But now, not a single person was passing by, and silence lingered.

In an excessively vast space with no sounds, it was natural to feel an overwhelming sense of incongruity.

Everyone felt such a sense of incongruity.

"Something must have happened."

"Let's go up."

The nearly empty Cathedral of the Holy Knights.

To confirm the absence of the Commander of the Holy Knights, Ellen led her companions up the stairs.

Her heart was pounding with an odd rhythm.

What was happening?

Or rather, what had happened?

The Cathedral was empty.

As if someone had deliberately driven everyone away.

Ellen, who had been climbing to the upper floor where the Commander's office was located, couldn't even reach it.

- Thud! Thud! Thump!

That was because a chilling sound of flesh being torn started to reach her ears.

"What… is that?"

The sound of something sharp tearing and cutting flesh.

- Bang! Bang!

The sound of something hitting the wall.

Ellen, who had a much more sensitive sense than ordinary people, could hear it, as could the others.

The overly quiet space made the sounds echo even more vividly.

Ellen immediately ran to where the sounds were coming from.

Near the Commander's office.

The conference room.

The sounds were coming from there.

- Crash!

Ellen kicked open the closed door of the conference room without hesitation.

And she couldn't help but widen her eyes at the scene unfolding before her.

Someone was killing people.

Ellen looked at the blood splattered in the conference room and the dead bodies.

Their flesh was so terribly torn and cut that they were unrecognizable, scattered messily.

The massive conference room had become a sea of blood.

The person, only seen from behind, slowly turned their head.

"I told everyone not to come this way…”

The person who turned around looked at Ellen and twisted their lips into a sinister smile.

"I guess there was no stopping you."

"What… What is this?"

As Ellen mumbled in shock, the others arrived as well.

"Uh…?"

Ludwig couldn't help but be dumbfounded as he looked at the massacre and the person who seemed to be responsible.

"Your Grace…?"

"Ah, Ludwig…”

Holding a small knife in a reverse grip, she wiped her nose with the back of her hand.

As she tried to wipe the blood off her face, it only smeared further, creating a grotesque sight.

"I see. Ludwig doesn't understand anything…”

Her expression conveyed a sense of overwhelming guilt.

However, the innocent look of remorse only appeared more eerie against her blood-stained body.

"Your Holiness…? How can you be…?"

Ludwig's reaction made it clear who the woman before him was.

Archbishop Rowan was alive.

The priestess, who was believed to be dead, was committing a massacre in the top-floor conference room of the Holy Knights' order.

And the knights blocking the entrance.

The empty Cathedral.

It was apparent that this wasn't a solo act.

There was a conspiracy.

A conspiracy so massive that it was difficult to fathom.

And the dead people.

Their mutilated bodies made it impossible to recognize them, but their attire gave them away.

"Who did you kill?"

At Ellen's question, Rowan shrugged her shoulders.

"The Popes."

There were a total of five dead.

That alone was enough for Ellen to grasp what had happened.

"But by any chance, have any of you seen Eleion Bolton?"

“…What?"

"He somehow caught wind of it and ran away."

The absence of the Holy Knight Commander was not a lie.

Except for Ludwig, everyone was seeing Rowan for the first time.

"Can you just stop interfering and leave if you don't know anything?"

“…What?"

"Meddling too much in other people's business is rude, you know."

It was impossible to even guess how the situation had started and what had happened.

The priestess, believed to be dead, was alive.

And for some reason, she had brutally slaughtered the five popes.

It seemed as if everyone in the Cathedral had stepped aside for her.

Where did it start?

What happened?

How did it come to this horrifying spectacle?

Should she draw her sword?

Ellen's eyes widened, and her fingertips trembled.

"I don't like that crazy woman either, but for now, I'd appreciate it if you left her alone."

Then, they couldn't help but turn their gazes to the corridor upon hearing a voice from behind.

"It's nice to go around causing a ruckus, but can you back off for now?"

All four of them could only gape in shock at the person who had suddenly appeared.

"Olivia… Lanze?"

One of the three temple students who had disappeared with the Demon King.

Olivia Lanze was looking at them.

Heinrich, Ludwig, and Louise.

They were all aghast, knowing that she should not be here.

"Let me make this brief."

Olivia stared at them with her arms crossed, whether they accepted her presence or not.

"From now on, the Holy Knights and the Five Great Religions are ours. Well… technically, we're only just getting on track."

"What are you saying…?"

"So, you should go back knowing that."

Olivia was looking directly at Ellen.

"You're smart. You know that if you make a scene here, things will get complicated, right?"

Faced with that arrogant and bold threat, Ellen felt like giving up on understanding the situation.

CHAPTER 613

Eleion Bolton was waiting for spatial teleportation at the warp spot.

The Popes were aware that the Demon King's following was growing. And although Eleion Bolton did not know the details, he could clearly sense the growing atmosphere.

However, that was not what was important.

The Church's forces in the Imperial Capital had already been infiltrated by the Demon King's followers, and it was clear that Rowan was the key figure.

But the only forces that had fallen were those of the Five Great Churches and Holy Knights in the Imperial Capital.

The Alliance Army.

While the Holy Knights and priests that Eleion Bolton had always commanded could potentially support the Demon King, they could not be controlled by Rowan.

The bond they had formed through countless battles and shared experiences was not something that could be easily betrayed.

Therefore, compared to the Holy Knights and priests of the Alliance Army, the Holy Knights and priests in the Imperial Capital were merely a handful.

Although a Holy Knight Commander's actual rank might be lower than that of a Pope, his authority and power were immense.

Rowan had merely managed to get that much control.

A Holy Knight Commander could stage a coup at any time if they wished, and this still held true.

If Eleion Bolton returned to the Alliance Army base with a large force of Holy Knights, he had enough military power to completely eradicate the corrupt forces in

the Imperial Capital and then some.

Eleion Bolton was the mastermind behind the insane act of attempting to eliminate the enemy's leader in the midst of enemy territory.

It was only possible because the elite Holy Knights who carried out this order were Eleion Bolton's people, but even they had been killed by Rowan.

He had underestimated Rowan's combat ability. It was clear that Rowan had been hiding her true strength.

Eleion Bolton intended to return to the Alliance Army base after carefully selecting those who could be trained among the remaining individuals and those who had not been caught by Rowan.

The priests and Holy Knights in the Imperial Capital were already beyond the control of the Popes and the Holy Knight Commander.

Although it was unclear what could be done, he had to return to the Alliance Army base and think it through.

Since the place he thought was home had turned out to be enemy territory, he needed to sort out his thoughts in a secure situation.

"What will happen… going forward?"

"I don't know."

It was infuriating that the Popes had handed over the entire church to the Demon King, especially since they were not the ones who had the authority to make decisions about the church in the first place.

Moreover, they had been ordering Rowan's people to track Rowan down.

The priests and Holy Knights in the Imperial Capital were dangerous.

He had to leave.

That was why Eleion Bolton was waiting for the mass teleportation magic to return to the Alliance Army at the warp spot.

"Once we return, we'll head straight to the base. There's no guarantee that Rowan's schemes haven't reached there as well. We'll verify that first, then decide how to handle this situation…"

He had ruined everything.

Eleion Bolton felt like biting his tongue at the thought that he had messed everything up.

He would return first.

Once he returned, then.

What would be next?

A civil war could break out if anything went wrong.

This place was no different from enemy territory.

The Holy Knights and priests of the Alliance Army respected the Holy Knight Commander more than the Popes. While some supported the Demon King, it was merely out of sympathy, and they genuinely followed Eleion Bolton, who had led them in battle. Therefore, they had no choice but to be on Eleion Bolton's side entirely.

Right now, Eleion Bolton was like a commander who had abandoned his army and jumped into enemy territory.

As long as he could return as he was, and if he could bring the army with him, control of the situation would be in the hands of Eleion Bolton.

He had no intention of usurping the authority of the popes.

However, if the authority of the popes became worthless, it was a problem he couldn't ignore.

It meant that the Holy Order had completely lost its function as an order.

The issue was that the Holy Order had been privatized by a single individual.

He would have respected the decision of the leaders to negotiate and coexist with the Demon King. It wasn't an unacceptable reason.

But if someone other than the leaders was already controlling the Holy Order, it shouldn't exist in such a way.

The popes were incompetent.

And so was Eleion Bolton.

He thought he was reading the situation, but he was only looking up.

The empire, the Demon King, the emperor.

He only thought about such things, and didn't properly examine the changes happening from below.

He judged that the movements starting from below might touch on larger issues, but he didn't know that the movements themselves were already a big problem.

He didn't know where to start, but he would return.

The popes were not only incompetent but also incapable.

However, Eleion Bolton knew that although he was aware of his incompetence, he was not incapable.

A huge number of holy knights and priests still followed his command.

After returning, he had to somehow deal with the already broken Holy Order.

He would be able to decide what to do next.

"Upon our return, gather immediately at the headquarters."

"Yes, Commander."

Eleion Bolton felt anxious and uneasy, knowing that his return could become the signal for a massive civil war.

Whether to adapt to the situation, what would happen with the collusion with the Demon King, and what would happen with Rowan's situation.

Too much was riding on his hands.

How long had he waited?

-Flash!

With a flash, the mass teleportation spell was cast.

As his vision flickered, Eleion Bolton opened his closed eyes.

“…Damn it."

And upon seeing the sight before him, Eleion Bolton had no choice but to realize everything.

Having teleported from the warp spot, he should have immediately teleported to the Alliance's warp spot.

However.

Eleion Bolton had arrived in an unnamed forest.

And not a single person of his party was with him.

But he was not alone.

There were two people in front of him.

On a tree stump, the Demon King was sitting.

"They decided to call it 'Intercept’…Well, you just experienced its function, so you know, right?"

And next to the Demon King was a girl with braided hair.

“…It's our first meeting."

Harriet de Saint Owan, called the greatest genius in magic history, was guarding the Demon King's side.

"From the start… I couldn't even return."

Eleion Bolton knew that if he returned, a civil war would break out.

There was no way others wouldn't know what the Commander of the Holy Knights himself knew.

"It's really… uncomfortable. We agreed to join hands just yesterday, and now we have to face each other like this."

Yesterday's enemy was today's friend.

Where did that agreement go, when today they had become enemies once more?

Going around and around, that was the story.

The events that would unfold if Eleion Bolton returned to the Alliance's garrison.

He should have been more cautious, but he didn't know that, so such an incident was bound to happen. From the moment Eleion Bolton had disappeared, it was only natural for him to try to return to the garrison.

"I never intended to kill any of you in the first place."

The Demon King spoke calmly.

"What's the point of changing the popes or the commander of the Holy Knights? It would just give me a headache."

"I like maintaining the status quo too, you know. Probably even more than you do."

"Of course, I don't want the Gate situation to stay the same."

"So, no major changes, the commander of the Holy Knights stays as is, and so do the popes. As long as we can get along without any interference, that's fine. Let's not

fight each other and spill blood. That was my plan. That's why I didn't intend to kill or replace anyone."

"But if we don't make changes, even worse things might happen."

"And while you were planning those terrible things, you didn't even tell me?"

"I know it's difficult for us to have a complete alliance or a superior-subordinate relationship. But the popes tried to kill all the heretics."

"I was willing to be used. But I didn't agree to be attached to the gallbladder and then tear it apart, or be attached to the liver and then tear off the gallbladder."

At the Demon King's words, Eleion Bolton's eyes widened.

"Yeah, you wouldn't have known. It must have been the popes' idea. You were so busy fighting monsters that you wouldn't have had time to think about such things, would you?"

"Thank you for not making me come up with pathetic excuses."

"I won't blame you for not knowing. It's not really a mistake."

For Eleion Bolton, the war had been overwhelming.

He was too far from the Empire to understand how the situation was unfolding, what the popes were thinking, and how the inner workings of the Church were progressing.

It was the same before the Allied Forces set out. Instead of being at the Holy Knights' headquarters, he roamed the battlefield.

He was so focused on the war that he was too far removed from practical matters.

That was Eleion Bolton's mistake.

He had tried too hard.

He had tried so hard to fulfill his duties and beliefs as a powerful Holy Knight who fought directly.

He hadn't paid attention to politics.

"So, I've decided to change all the popes. Of course, if I tell them not to do something while holding a knife to their throats, they'll nod in agreement. But the fact that those damned bastards didn't tell me about the heretic massacre plan already means they've screwed me over enough. It's better to have someone who listens well and understands my intentions."

"Could it be…?"

Eleion Bolton stared at the Demon King with his mouth agape.

"I met Rowan too late. If it had been before she did her crazy deeds, I might not have known, but if left as is, either all the heretics will die or the Empire will fall apart. One of those things will happen."

The Demon King had to make a decision.

"The Five Holy Churches will be United, and a new religious system will be established by integrating them with the Demon God Cult and the Hero Religion. So that all heretics can be protected. No, they're not heretics anymore. They will be incorporated into the Holy Churches."

The United Holy Church.

"And a sister I know well will become the leader there."

Arrows and bombs shot by others exploded here and there, eventually converging into one massive explosion.

In the end, it was both a massive unification and the beginning of division.

Instead of stopping the chaos at hand, it would later become the core of the divide.

"Planting the flag of Darkland… in the heart of the empire…"

The perceptive ones all knew that the Demon King's forces had entered the Imperial City.

"Yes."

The Demon King had taken action, knowing that everything could fall apart if he didn't.

He had intended to utilize the five Great Religions as they were, but the situation had spiraled out of control. Therefore, it was necessary to undergo even greater fundamental changes to survive.

If they hadn't tried to kill Rowan, the events that would have been postponed to the future were rapidly brought forward by a single decision made by Eleion Bolton.

"I honestly didn't agree with purges like this. That's why I left you all alone. But it seems that crazy Rowan was right."

"…"

"It seems like new wine should be stored in new wineskins."

If they left the group alone after taking control, the existing interests would remain. In that case, it was no different from not having taken control at all. There would be plenty of opportunities to hide things from the higher-ups and collude with them.

"It was impossible to just lend my name halfway."

If they were going to do it, they had to do it thoroughly, accurately.

And cruelly.

So that there would be no backstabbing.

Even during times of peace, purges were frequent. At this point, when the whole world was shaking, trying to take control of a group without driving out the existing vested interests was a foolish move. They had realized this.

They had thought that capturing the popes and the Holy Knights' commander meant they had taken control of the Religious Order and the Holy Knights.

But in reality, they hadn't taken control at all.

The existing popes had always intended to eliminate the heretics someday, so they weren't suitable figures for a reformed religious system. And inevitably, it was

impossible to hope that they would accept new ideas. If they cooperated, it would be a pretense.

The popes, who had deluded themselves into thinking they had power when they didn't, were eliminated.

And now, Eleion Bolton.

He had real power, symbolic significance, and many followers.

He was, in fact, the core of the Five Great Religions' military power.

If Eleion Bolton had safely returned to the Allied Forces' garrison, depending on his choice, a civil war might have broken out in the Imperial City.

"The popes were despicable, but it seems like you did your best and still ended up with nothing but evil deeds?"

In reality, Eleion Bolton had not sold out the order to the Demon King. That had been the popes' choice.

Attempting to purge Rowan had ultimately been an action taken in the belief that it would be best not to cause such chaos at the present time.

"But since we've decided to support Rowan, we can't go on together."

However, now that the purge had begun, the fact that Eleion Bolton was part of the old power structure remained unchanged.

It wasn't a matter of stepping down because he had done something wrong, but of being forced to step down because he had to.

That was what purges were about.

And since they had decided to join hands with Rowan, Eleion Bolton, who had once tried to kill her, could no longer be left alone in the Holy Knights.

"So, unlike the popes, I want to give you a choice."

Eleion Bolton stared at the Demon King with a stern expression.

"A choice…?"

"Yes, exactly two choices."

The Demon King raised two fingers.

"First, die by my hand right here."

The Demon King folded one finger.

"Second, retire peacefully."

Retirement.

It was a word he never even imagined, worse than death.

On the top floor of the main hall of the Cathedral of Holy Knight, an uncomfortable silence persisted.

The survival of the priestess who was said to have died.

And the scene where that priestess brutally murdered the five popes.

The appearance of Olivia Lanze, who had disappeared with the Demon King.

No one knew how it all started, but Olivia Lanze's words were clear.

The Holy Knights and the Five Great Religions now belonged to the Demon King.

Ellen stood clenching her fists, unable to take any action, and Louise and Heinrich were in the same state.

"This… this is just nonsense…"

Only Ludwig, in that place, glared at Olivia Lanze with wide, incredulous eyes.

"How can you be here? How can the Demon King have the Holy Knights? That kind of thing… that kind of thing shouldn't happen! How can you all! Like this… like this. So

brazenly. Spout such nonsense in the middle of the main hall!"

Ludwig's anger, buried in self-loathing and guilt, exploded.

"Don't you feel even a bit of guilt? Do you know how many people died because of you? And this was all the Demon King's plan? How can you be so shameless to do this…!"

"Hey."

"Am I talking to you?"

“…What?"

Olivia clicked her tongue.

"And who are you to begin with?"

"!!"

To Olivia, Ludwig was merely someone she had briefly encountered and quickly forgotten.

CHAPTER 614

"Who are you?"

At those shocking words, Ludwig couldn't help but stiffen.

Ludwig was at a loss for words, realizing that his opponent didn't know who he was.

"I don't have time to persuade a small fry like you."

Being treated as a small fry.

At that cruel comment, Ludwig felt the urge to bite his tongue.

"Step back, Ellen. I don't want to fight you."

"…"

In that situation, Olivia didn't speak to anyone except Ellen Artorius.

Even Louise seemed to be left out of the picture, as if knowing that once Ellen stepped back, the rest would follow.

Ludwig's eyes shone as he looked at Ellen, who neither drew her sword nor stepped back.

That hesitation.

That fear.

That dread and indecision.

Ludwig clearly saw it.

In the first place, being a hero was just a facade.

Was it impossible for Ellen to stand against the Demon King?

Had she still not forgotten the feelings she held in the past?

There was a lingering doubt in Ludwig's mind.

If Ellen faced the Demon King, she might not be able to fight.

Just as Ellen had shown a sensitive reaction to Christina's harsh words.

Regardless of the truth, Ludwig had thought that Ellen might not be able to thrust her sword at the Demon King.

In that situation, Ludwig couldn't help but confirm it.

Not even showing hostility to the people who had disappeared with the Demon King, Ludwig saw Ellen's inability to act.

Ludwig realized she wasn't the person who could fight the Demon King.

-Kuruung!

At that moment, Ludwig's entire body was enveloped in blue mana.

He understood Ellen's helplessness.

He didn't blame Ellen.

But if no one else stepped forward, if, for whatever reason, Ellen didn't try to fight –

Someone else had to fight.

One should not back down from fear and dread.

Someone had to punish those demons.

"Ludwig! No!"

As Ludwig tried to step forward, Ellen desperately grabbed his shoulder.

"You… No, don't do it. You don't know anything. Don't do it. Don't fight."

Why I can't fight.

Why I can't draw my sword.

At those words, Ludwig gritted his teeth.

"What don't I know?"

"…"

"What can't you tell me?"

At Ludwig's words, Ellen gritted her teeth.

She hated her position and actions, but she knew she had no choice.

"It's better not to know… Not knowing is better…"

The words of the Emperor and Turner, saying that it's better not to know, were returned by Ellen to Ludwig.

"It's all my fault. It's all because of my mistakes. Just know that… Just know that…"

You don't know anything.

It's better not to know.

Even a tiny bit of truth is more cruel than not saying anything at all.

It only plants a sense of unworthiness for not knowing the truth.

"Right, don't be stubborn for no reason."

With a tone both affectionate and brutal, Ludwig looked at Olivia this time.

"I don't know about Ellen or the princess there, or even the supernatural, but you don't seem to matter much, do you? If you mess around, I might just kill you."

Those words were the raw truth.

"There are things in the world that you don't need to know, and things that only give you a headache when you try to find out. So just live without knowing. Don't think of throwing your life away with strange stubbornness."

It was a violent statement, yet at the same time, it was meant to prevent Ludwig from charging in recklessly.

There was no reason to approach the truth that would only bring about uselessness and sadness.

My opponent was out of my league, and charging in recklessly would only result in my own demise.

I don't even know who you are.

That's why you're a petty guy, someone whose death won't make any difference.

Olivia's words, that it wouldn't be a big deal to kill you, and that if you made a fuss, she'd kill you, were a brutal truth.

In the face of that truth, Ludwig couldn't even take a single step.

If he were to die right here.

If he were to be killed.

What would happen then?

If Ellen were to die, it would be a big deal. She was a hero, after all.

Louise von Schwarz was the commander of the Schwarz Army. If she were to die, the allied forces would be plunged into chaos.

Heinrich was a very powerful force within the allied forces, displaying a level of prowess similar to Ellen's.

They were all people who should not be harmed or killed.

In this situation, only Ludwig was…

Someone who wouldn't be missed even if he died, the most insignificant existence.

Ellen firmly gripped Ludwig's shoulder, preventing him from acting recklessly.

"That's… right…”

Because if a person who didn't matter died, they might actually die.

Because Olivia Lanze might really do it.

Ludwig couldn't help but notice that Ellen was desperately preventing him from stepping forward.

But the situation itself was already strange.

It was strange that Olivia Lanze would care about such a thing in the first place.

Why didn't Ellen attack Olivia?

Why didn't Olivia want to fight Ellen?

If Olivia Lanze was on the Demon King's side, she wouldn't have to worry about such things.

Not Ellen, nor Louise, nor Heinrich.

If she were a subordinate of the Demon King, she should try to kill them somehow. After all, all three would pose a threat to the Demon King.

However, Olivia had an attitude that she couldn't touch the three of them, but could kill the insignificant Ludwig.

And Ellen seemed to know that, blocking Ludwig.

Olivia didn't want to fight Ellen, and Ellen didn't want to fight Olivia.

Even after hearing the shocking news that the Demon King had swallowed the Five Great Religions, they didn't draw their swords.

The fact revealed by their attitude.

Though he didn't know everything, there was one truth he could understand through this situation.

Although they had to acknowledge each other as enemies outwardly, they couldn't actually confront each other when they met face to face.

They didn't hate each other.

They didn't even think of each other as enemies.

Ellen hadn't foreseen or known this situation.

However, though she was taken aback, she didn't try to fight in the end.

No, she couldn't fight.

"From the very beginning… all… all of it… everything that people know…"

Ludwig mumbled, as if feeling empty.

"It was all a lie, wasn't it?"

Ludwig's eyes sank, dark and deep.

There could be no fight at that place.

Heinrich and Louise remained silent, knowing that if they acted recklessly, a catastrophe would occur.

There were only those who didn't draw their swords and those for whom drawing their swords would be meaningless.

In the end, they could only watch helplessly as the Holy Knights were handed over to the Demon King, unable to do anything, and had no choice but to retreat from that place.

The Empire had been reviving the corpses of fallen warriors to create an army of the undead.

For some reason, Rowan, who was thought to be dead, was alive and had taken control of the Order of the Holy Knights as a servant of the Demon King.

They only knew the outcome.

They had no choice but to watch the outcome.

It was only natural for Ludwig, as well as Louise and Heinrich, to be shocked.

And the shock that Ellen felt could only have been greater.

Those who knew the truth behind Reinhardt's actions, as well as those who did not, could only feel fear and terror as to why this was happening and why he was doing this.

"Ludwig, I…"

"I don't know much. I probably don't even deserve to know. What difference would it make if I found out?"

Ellen hesitantly opened her mouth after a long walk, but Ludwig cut her off mid-sentence.

The right to know something.

The need not to know something.

Did such things exist?

"But even if I'm an idiot, I know this."

"…"

"If the Order of the Holy Knights already belongs to the Demon King, then you shouldn't have fought there."

Ludwig slowly nodded, as if accepting the reason Ellen couldn't fight.

"It's not about whether you can or can't fight the Demon King, it's just that you shouldn't have fought… I understand now."

Ludwig seemed to finally understand that the situation could have gone disastrously wrong if they had messed up.

"It's probably something nobody should know about, right? That the Order has fallen to the Demon King? If that gets out, even bigger trouble will arise."

Ludwig asked Ellen, looking at her. If they should keep this a secret.

Ellen couldn't give any answer.

With no answer from Ellen, Ludwig now turned his gaze to Louise.

"Because innocent people might die. They might get caught up in a fight that has nothing to do with them. To minimize the sacrifices, it has to be this way."

"…"

Ludwig didn't blame Ellen.

Ludwig had seen with his own eyes that Ellen couldn't fight the Demon King.

It was an unavoidable situation.

Ludwig put himself in her shoes.

What if his precious friends like Ranian Sesor and Delphin, who were actually the Demon King, had been at stake?

He wouldn't have been able to draw his sword either.

It would be unfair, infuriating, and sad.

But he couldn't imagine fighting without hesitation.

Therefore, Ludwig thought that Ellen might have wavered too, and that was the truth.

He didn't resent Ellen.

There was no reason to.

Not being able to fight was just that.

It was the world's demand that Ellen had to kill the Demon King, not her own will.

It was a cruelly sad thing for Ellen, who had saved countless people, to be resented for not being able to thrust her sword at the Demon King.

But if things continued like this, and they couldn't do this or that.

What would be left other than the words that nothing could be done?

With things happening as they were, and new events unfolding as they did.

It would be applicable to every moment that they must leave everything alone.

And another issue.

As they had heard from Christina as well.

The Gate incident wasn't solely the fault of the Demon King.

There was some hidden truth.

Ludwig didn't know what Ellen's words, saying that it was enough to know that everything was her fault, specifically meant.

The important thing was that he had no right to know the truth.

The reason was simple.

He was nothing.

He wasn't important.

He was a worthless existence, so it didn't matter if he died, and he had no right to know the truth.

Where did such a thing come from?

Who had the authority to grant the right to know the truth?

The truth didn't even matter anymore.

Regardless of what it was, Ludwig had come to realize that it held no value.

Thus, he wasn't curious anymore.

Ludwig's expression, having crossed the threshold of powerlessness and emptiness, became calm instead.

"It's difficult."

That's all he said.

"It's too difficult."

Having passed the Temple Gate, Ludwig hurriedly left, even though the path he took was the same.

"I'll go ahead."

No one was fighting.

Even though someone must have done something wrong.

If no one wanted to fight, what should they do?

Although Ludwig mentioned it was difficult, his dark expression and determined steps were more resolute than ever before.

As if he had finally decided what to do.

As if he finally understood.

Ellen watched Ludwig's retreating figure, biting her lip.

Only the dark and dull figure of a person who had realized there was nothing given to them, because they were so small and insignificant, could be felt.

The cruel truth in Olivia Lanze's insult that his death wouldn't affect the grand scheme of things.

That was the unvarnished truth.

Even though the reason for that was to prevent Ludwig from acting recklessly, the fact that her words were true and had pierced Ludwig's heart like a dagger didn't change.

Louise sighed.

"The Demon King doesn't want the world's destruction, and the Empire cannot help but waver. That's how it's come to be."

Louise had no choice but to somewhat understand the past, present, and future just by sensing the massive flow of events, even if she didn't know the specific details.

She could already feel it without Ellen telling her in detail.

The raging heretics.

The massacre.

The Demon King seizing control of the Holy Knights.

The hero who couldn't fight.

The Demon King's servant who didn't want to fight the hero.

And.

The silence of the Empire.

"I ended up not knowing the things I wanted to know, but I've come to know what I must know."

Louise couldn't tell where Rowan's story had started and where it intertwined.

She didn't need to know anymore.

But, quite unexpectedly, Louise had come to know what she needed to know.

What had to be done for the royal family to survive.

She had come to know in which direction the massive flow of the era was headed.

Louise had failed as an individual and had not resolved anything.

But as a princess of Kernstadt, she couldn't have been more successful.

Louise looked at Ellen, who stared blankly at the snow-covered wasteland with a hardened expression.

She was on the verge of crumbling.

But she couldn't collapse, so her hardened expression didn't waver.

That pale, hardened expression, like a piece of glass that seemed to break at any moment.

Louise continued to watch.

CHAPTER 615

Ellen quietly led her group away.

Taking Ludwig, who seemed to have realized something and lost his wits, they disappeared.

"We really have bad luck."

At Rowan's words, Olivia chuckled.

"I'm sure we have some kind of curse. We always end up seeing the scenes we really don't want to see. Unfortunate."

"Ha ha, maybe all moments are scenes we don't want to see?"

"You might be right."

In the conference room turned into a bloodbath, Olivia watched Rowan cleaning up the scene.

With a purification prayer, a rag, and a broom, she was wiping, clearing, and organizing the scattered flesh pieces.

"If you're going to clean up so diligently, why did you make such a mess in the first place?"

"People like them shouldn't die comfortably. That's why I made them suffer a bit."

“…What kind of death do you think someone like you deserves?"

"I'll think about it when the time comes."

"Nice attitude."

"An attitude is all I've got."

Neither Rowan, who was laughing and cleaning the bloodbath, nor Olivia, who was watching the scene sullenly without any intention of helping, could be called sane.

"I wonder what happened to Eleion Bolton?"

"If he went back, he went back. If he couldn't, he couldn't. There'll be measures taken."

"Good to know."

Whether they intercepted Eleion Bolton returning to the allied forces or not, they were prepared.

Eleion Bolton couldn't lead his army back safely to the base and return with the imperial troops.

"We're not going to kill Eleion Bolton. Any objections?"

"I'm not sure about objections, but wouldn't there be repercussions?"

"We'll send him somewhere where there can be no repercussions."

"Isn't it not possible to send someone into exile these days?"

"Exile? We'll provide him with a nice house in a place with good water and scenery, so he can live out the rest of his life comfortably. He just won't be able to use anyone or be used by anyone. Don't you think someone like him deserves at least a comfortable death?"

"As someone who almost died because of him, I shouldn't be the one to say, but yes."

Eleion Bolton would spend the rest of his life in Edina.

Rowan laughed brightly, understanding the meaning of Olivia's words.

"Anyway, it seems you've found a new base somewhere."

"Do you want to see?"

"Of course."

"Go see."

"I'll do my best."

Even though she seemed like a tasteless writer, and a madman who sends chills down one's spine, her loyalty to the Demon King was real.

It had only been a few days since Olivia had seen Rowan.

However, she treated Rowan very warmly.

"I understand that you like Reinhardt, but why do you like me?"

"When no one believed in the Demon King, you were one of the few who did."

“…Ah."

Rowan claimed to be a follower of the Demon King, but when she first met the Demon King, she thought his words were false.

Her thoughts changed when the Gate incident occurred, and everything went according to the Demon King's foresight.

That's why Rowan could only think of the three people who believed in the Demon King from beginning to end as being almost equal to the Demon King.

"I wonder if it was really necessary to kill the Popes."

Olivia sighed deeply.

"They won't be able to accept the Holy Order. It's still difficult for me to accept that the Demon God Cult and Holy Religions actually share the same roots. Can these old popes really accept that?"

"I guess not."

Before Rowan learned about the Demon King's contact, her plan was to add two more orders to the Five Great Holy Religions.

She would incite chaos in the refugee camp, leading to a massacre, and intensify the

resentment against the empire.

Then she would take control of the Holy Religions and remodel the Holy Knights Order and the Five Great Holy Religions to include the Demon God Cult and the Hero Religion.

She didn't think it would go smoothly, and she had no concrete plans.

However, she knew that the moment the Five Great Holy Religions expanded, enormous chaos would ensue.

What Rowan wanted was destruction.

But then the Demon King appeared in time.

The Demon King didn't want chaos.

Rowan had desired destruction, but the Demon King didn't, so her objectives changed.

Rowan's plan had been halted midway, but there was no way to undo what had already happened.

The massacre had taken place, and resentment against the empire had reached its peak.

She would not attempt the next step of indiscriminate expansion and turning the order itself into a bomb to be detonated at will.

The Demon King intended to reform the faith.

Not like Rowan, who wanted to cause chaos by simultaneously inciting the Hero Religion and the Demon God Cult.

He would correct the misunderstandings about Demon God Cult and Holy Religions under the name of the United Holy Church.

Of course, that work wouldn't be easy either. In the end, it might still turn into a bomb.

But this time, the designer of the bomb had no intention of detonating it.

Therefore, transforming the Holy Religions into the United Holy Church couldn't happen suddenly like in Edina.

They would take their time and gradually progress through stages.

"Even if the popes couldn't accept our plan, it wasn't impossible to set them up as puppets. Wouldn't that make the cleanup easier? Who will do the work the popes have been doing up to now? It would be suspicious if five popes were replaced at once. I have no intention of arguing with Reinhardt's decision, but I'm not sure if it's the right choice."

"Ah… I see what you mean."

The sudden appearance of five vacant seats among the popes.

Chaos that Reinhardt didn't want would ensue.

Rowan lowered her head at Olivia's question, which implied that the chaos itself would intensify and the Holy Religions would falter.

"Don't worry, the popes never really did any work in the first place."

“…They just occupied the positions?"

"Of course, when they gave orders, we worked, but they didn't really do any work themselves. They had no real power either. So, there's no problem without the popes. It might even run more smoothly."

"But if they gave orders as they wished and the people below had to do the work, it means the popes were working and had real power. What are you talking about?"

"Do you think those orders came from their own minds?"

"Huh?"

Olivia tilted her head, seemingly not understanding Rowan's words.

"Did they listen to the advice given by the assistant bishops, make judgments based

on their advice, receive analysis, and learn the best choices, or did they just parrot the words like a parrot? Can we really say that the decisions they made came from their own minds?"

"Ah."

"If you can control the information entering someone's head, you can control their actions and judgments as well. But that person would think that they've made the decisions and acted on their own accord. Surprisingly, it's easier to manipulate the thoughts of stubborn old people."

"Control, you say?"

"Did they really worry themselves into thinking that they had to join the Demon King? Was it the Popes' judgment?"

"Ugh…"

"Whispers in their ears about the overwhelming power of the Demon King, how his support is abundant within the Order itself. That if things continued like this, the Order might be completely taken over. That a coup might happen within the Order. The trend these days is like this. It's difficult to change the trend. If such words are whispered repeatedly."

Rowan laughed.

"What kind of thoughts would arise in the heads of old pigs desperate to preserve their positions?"

"Of course, they'd think they made their judgments and decisions based on their own evaluation."

"But what if the Demon King's support wasn't as substantial as the Popes had heard?"

"What if those whispering around them exaggerated, inflated, and even fabricated facts?"

"Would their judgment still be valid?"

People make judgments based on information.

But information isn't synonymous with the truth.

When the information provided leads to a single path, people follow it, thinking it's their own judgment.

They don't think about who paved the way.

They don't think about who's showing them the path.

That's why people, believing it's their own judgment and decision, walk the path led by someone else without realizing it.

The Popes were in a state that was no different from being brainwashed.

And now, having outlived their usefulness, they were killed.

And it wasn't just them.

"What about others besides the Popes?"

The same goes for others within the Order.

Rumors began to spread about the growing positive sentiment towards the Demon King and his followers, gaining people's sympathy.

It's possible that it never existed in the first place.

It might have been falsely recognized as a trend, and as people jumped on the bandwagon, it actually became one.

If Rowan's words were true, the Order's fall to the Demon King started with a mere baseless rumor.

It's like becoming a trend because it's known as a trend.

The Order crumbled due to mere rumors.

"I didn't want this outcome, but thanks to the information planted in the Popes'

heads, I got to meet the Demon King. So, I guess it wasn't a waste of time."

"What was your original plan?"

"I wanted to make the Order support the Demon King and have them fight against the Empire."

“…You do know that you're the person Reinhardt hates the most, right?"

"Wouldn't it be stranger if he liked someone like me? In fact, if there was someone like that, I'd be scared."

“…You really know how to ruin a mood."

"Your Majesty."

"I'm not yet that, but what?"

"Ludwig, he must have been hurt."

At the unexpected remark, Olivia furrowed her brow.

It seemed as if her memories were slowly resurfacing.

During the Temple Tournament, was he the one who had faced Reinhardt?

“…It's quite refreshing hearing that from someone like you. What do you want me to do about it? Who is he to me?"

"It's nothing."

Rowan said it more harshly.

Ludwig was nothing.

Rowan didn't say anything more. But Olivia thought of Ludwig's expression.

The expression of someone who seemed to have gained a miserable realization.

The expression of someone who had unknowingly known the truth and heard it

confirmed by others.

He was a nobody.

But wasn't all of this happening because of those nobodies?

Was it a warning not to hurt those who were nothing?

Or was it a warning that no one knew what would happen if they hurt those who were nothing?

It was probably the latter.

"Because he's nothing, we should have been more careful?"

"Instead of hurting, it would have been better to kill him."

When those who were nothing became something to someone, what would happen?

That was happening right in front of Olivia's eyes.

The news of the assassination of the Popes of the Five Great Religions did not spread anywhere. It was an easy matter to control the information within the Churches since it did not have frequent external activities.

All work was conducted quietly, holding their breath.

The change of the Holy Knight Order leader.

The control of Olivia Lanze's brain trust.

The sudden appearance of priests with great divine power.

Their new teachings.

Everything was carried out quietly, covertly.

The snow stopped.

The sky cleared.

Mild weather continued.

Suddenly, truly suddenly.

The snow, which seemed like it would fall forever, stopped abruptly, and warm sunlight shone on the earth as if it were a lie.

It was almost late spring when the warm weather arrived.

The frozen atmosphere in the Imperial Palace did not melt, but the fallen snow did.

Like a lie.

As if the snow had never fallen, everyone in the Imperial Palace could see it all melt.

"You know, with this, we can't stop it, right?"

"I know."

The Demon King was walking with Liana de Grantz in a quiet park of the Imperial Palace, watching the melting snow turn into streams of water.

"We might be able to prevent the massacre now, but later you might have to kill even more people with your own hands."

"…"

"You're not unaware that postponing the problem will make it bigger."

"True."

The empire used violence to suppress the riot in the refugee camp.

They captured Rowan to prevent the ominous atmosphere from turning into a larger riot.

In exchange for capturing Rowan, they gained control over not only the Holy Knight Order and the Five Great Religions but also the refugee camp area.

But this was just a temporary solution.

Just like the empire prevented its imminent collapse through massacre.

Before the Gate incident, no group's collapse could happen, so these things occurred.

The task of bringing down and absorbing the empire that had already lost its legitimacy and cause would be the work after the Gate incident.

At some point, when this matter surfaces, the Demon King must repeat the same history.

And on a larger scale.

"Can you do it?"

"…"

Everyone knows that they are only plugging the holes as they come, and one day the dam will collapse.

This time, someone blocks it; next time, someone else blocks it.

They know that they are merely postponing the moment the dam collapses.

"Did I ever do something because I was able to?"

Swinging a sword, too.

Becoming the Demon King, too.

Everything I had done up until now was not because I could do it.

I had done it because I had to.

At the end of everything I thought I had to do, all I found out was the truth that I shouldn't have done anything.

Still, I continue to do what must be done.

But upon hearing those words, Liana bit her lip as she looked at the Demon King.

"In the end, you can't say you can do it."

"…"

All the Demon King could do was laugh miserably at those words.

"Poor thing. Come here, let your big sister give you a hug."

"Get lost."

A brief spring came to the Imperial Palace.

Snow and ice melted, but in the end, nothing really melted.

Such was the fleeting spring.

CHAPTER 616

The snow had stopped in the imperial capital, and for several days, a strangely warm climate had persisted.

The new year had already arrived, and while the political atmosphere remained frozen, the weather itself continued to be unseasonably warm.

Ludwig was strolling through the streets of the temple, taking advantage of the unexpected warmth. The main gate of the temple was just ahead of him.

"Ludwig, it seems we have a visitor."

"A visitor?"

It was a message relayed by one of the few remaining dormitory building servants.

"Yes, she doesn't have entry permission, so she’s waiting outside."

"Ah…”

As Ludwig left the temple gate, he could see a woman in uniform sitting on a bench in the square in front of the boarding house.

It was the uniform of the Holy Knight Order.

The woman stood up and smiled brightly at Ludwig.

"Ludwig."

"…”

"I've been busy with various things, so I've only just managed to come and see you. I'm sorry."

Rowan, dressed in the uniform of the Holy Knight Order, had come to see Ludwig alone.

"What business do you have with me, newly appointed commander of the Holy Knight Order?"

Not long ago, he had heard the news that Archbishop Rowan was appointed as the commander of the Holy Knight Order following the sudden retirement of Eleion Bolton.

Ludwig's expression as he looked at Rowan held no hostility or malice.

Only the cold attitude of someone who had closed their heart to everything in the world remained.

Initially, the Holy Knight Order had the authority to investigate Rowan's assassination case.

It was a matter for the Holy Knight Order and the main religious organization to determine who had died in the burnt church and to make the announcement.

Rowan had never been dead, she had only faked her death.

Now, she had been appointed as the new commander of the Holy Knight Order following Eleion Bolton's sudden retirement.

The decision was made at a meeting of the Pope level.

It was ridiculous to say that a meeting of the Popes had been held when none of them were present.

To Ludwig, who had personally witnessed the deaths of five Popes at her hands, the story was nothing but a laughable play.

Ludwig could not know whether Eleion Bolton had really retired or been assassinated.

But now, he had no interest in such things.

Sitting on a bench in front of the temple gate, Rowan spoke to Ludwig, who had no intention of listening.

About what had happened, why she had done those things.

Why she had almost been killed, why she had faked her death, why she needed time, and why she had approached Ludwig.

Having heard all the reasons, Ludwig stared at Rowan.

His expression held no shock, horror, or betrayal at learning the truth.

"So, what's your point?"

Ludwig simply said that.

“…Just that. It's sad if you don't know anything, right? It's frustrating."

"Are you telling me this because I'm useless? That you caused all this trouble by impulsively attacking the heretics, and that's why the Empire killed people like that, and that's why it ended up like this? That no one would believe me even if I told someone because it doesn't sound like it’s possible?"

"Um…”

Rowan hesitated for a moment, and finally nodded her head.

"I can't say it's not like that. In an age when rumors abound, people believe them only as much as they don't believe them. So even if you go around saying that Rowan is actually the mastermind behind the operation in the refugee camp as the new Knight Commander, no one would believe it."

"Leaving aside whether they believe it or not, the Inquisitors would try to take me away."

"You know that well."

It was okay to tell him since it didn't matter whether he knew or not.

Ludwig stared at Rowan with a firm expression.

"Anyway, did you think I would accept it when I heard it? That there was such a situation, and that what you had done was for a good cause?"

"I wouldn't have thought so. I thought you'd either scold me harshly or try to kill me."

"If I tried to kill you, would you die?"

"No, not at all."

Ludwig showed no reaction to Rowan's awkward response.

He just continued speaking calmly and coldly.

"So, you're saying that even if I hear the truth, I can't kill you after hearing it, and if I tell people the truth, they won't believe me?"

"I can't deny that."

"Rather than killing you, the fact that you don't even kill me means…"

"…"

"Am I not even worth killing?"

"Speaking harshly, yes."

Ludwig didn't get angry even at Rowan's cruel words.

"Anyway, let's put that aside."

"…"

"Isn't it strange?"

"What is?"

"A few days ago, I was treated like someone who doesn't need to know because I'm useless. Now, I'm treated like someone who can know because I'm useless. Who exactly decides that?"

Some truth.

It's okay if you don't know because you're not important.

It's okay if you know because you're not important.

Ultimately, Ludwig found the behavior and attitudes of those who handled the truth more strange than the truth itself.

In the end, there was no value in the truth.

"I thought about it for a few days."

"Yes."

"Your affairs, the Demon King's affairs, Ellen's affairs, the Empire's affairs. I thought about all of that…"

Ludwig spoke with a deadpan expression.

"Even if Ellen can't say it, saying it's all her fault is one thing…"

"Everyone seemed to have their reasons. I don't know the details, but it seemed like there were reasons and stories behind it."

"Without such things, they wouldn't say or act like that."

"Otherwise, they wouldn't face each other with such expressions."

"Everyone looked sad; no one seemed happy. Everyone probably had a good reason."

"But now, that doesn't seem to be important."

Ludwig looked at Rowan and said,

"You guys seem to think you're in a position to decide on such things."

"The important thing is that."

"That's the problem."

"It's not about what the truth is or what the story is, but the attitude of trying to

control the truth. Pretending to care for people but actually not, allowing people to know something or not know something, it's that attitude of thinking you can decide on those things that's the problem."

"I felt that from you."

"A very unpleasant and disgusting sense of superiority."

"You don't know."

"But you're doing something incredibly great and noble that you don't know."

"So you don't have to know. Just get out."

"You don't know."

"But you've done something truly great and noble without knowing it. It may seem bad on the outside, but it's not really. So you should understand."

"So listen. How about that, after listening, I'm right, aren't I? The action you've taken against me is exactly this, right?"

"Isn't this unpleasant?"

"Sometimes you don't tell me, and sometimes you do."

"The reason is the same, but the actions are different."

"If the reason seems plausible but the actions are opposite, then you're just doing as you please."

"So, the attitude is the same."

"You treat people like nothing, like worthless people like me."

"Whether you tell me or not."

"Going further, you think you have the right to save or kill someone."

"Like when you killed the popes based on your judgment, regardless of what wrong

they actually did."

"You guys are just strange people lost in some wildly delusional fantasy."

"The truth?"

"I'm not even curious about that anymore."

"What you guys are trying to do, what you want, and what you've done are no longer important."

"What's important is that all of you are intoxicated by something."

"Whether it's a sense of mission, malice, hatred, or vengeance against the world, or whatever."

"Or the illusion that you are making a great sacrifice to save the world."

"You're intoxicated with disgusting delusions."

"It's not surprising that you guys deserve to fall into hell as devils. But I can't give you that punishment. Yeah, as you said, I'm nothing."

"But that doesn't mean the truth runs away."

"The truth doesn't disappear."

"You guys are sinners, right?"

"Sinners should be punished, right?"

"But you haven't been punished, have you?"

"This is the truth."

"It's not those complicated things that I can't know, nor do I want to know, about your relationships, emotions, or whatever. Simple and clear things like this are the truth."

"With so many people buried by your actions, you keep burying more, whispering

the truth amongst yourselves, and taking turns understanding and licking each other's wounds. That's disgusting."

"The truth should be explainable in a single word."

"You guys should be punished, but you haven't been."

"That's the only truth."

Ludwig found a simple truth in the labyrinth of thoughts, judgments, and circumstances.

There must be a price for sin.

If sinners are whispering each other's sins and remaining silent?

Someone has to take responsibility.

"Not long ago, Ellen looked pitiful."

"She looked miserable. So I don't blame her. There's no reason to blame."

"Like Ellen's appearance, you must have such stories. You might be pitiable and wretched people too."

"But."

"Among the people who died, was there even one who wasn't like that?"

"They would be pitiful and wronged. They had to die without knowing anything, getting caught up in it all."

"So it's better not to know your so-called truth."

"From now on, even if you come forward and tell me everything, I will close my ears."

"Feeling sorry for you, understanding you, it doesn't make the truth that you must be punished disappear."

"Because that truth is clear."

"Knowing nothing, I'll become your enemy."

"Regardless of the truth, whatever it is, no matter how justified, you must pay the price."

"There are so many people who have paid the price without doing anything wrong. No, there are even more people who were forced to be sacrificed, not even paying the price."

"You, who are involved in these matters, must pay the price, right?"

"Regardless of the reason, you must be punished."

"Regardless of the intent, you must pay the price."

"That's the conclusion I've reached."

There were sins.

There were sinners.

However, there was no judgment.

It was difficult to find the right path amidst the many complicated events that unfolded between the Empire, the Holy Order, and the Demon King's forces.

Only finding the sins was easy.

Only finding the sinners was easy.

And the unchanging truth that they had not been punished.

Whoever they were.

Everyone deceived, trampled, and used the little ones under the pretext of saving everyone.

Rowan smiled as he watched such a Ludwig.

"It's like looking at myself in the past."

A person who was saddened by their own insignificance.

And Rowan, who eventually became a monster, looked at Ludwig as if looking back on her distant past.

As if it was interesting.

As if it was fascinating.

"How do you plan to do it? How will you punish these monsters, Ludwig?"

A useless existence cannot be punished or punish others.

"…"

"To be friends with monsters, you must become a monster."

To be friends with monsters, one must be equal.

Rowan did that.

"You know that's the same if you try to kill monsters, right?"

To kill monsters, one must also be equal.

One must become a monster, after all.

If anything, one must become an even greater monster to kill them.

"I know."

Ludwig stared at Rowan with dark, abyss-like eyes.

Rowan felt a different kind of thrill than when she faced the Demon King not long ago, as she looked at Ludwig's expression.

"I'm well aware."

It was the thrill of having created a monster with her own hands.

Someone who was nothing, now striving to become something.

Regardless of the reason, intent, or purpose.

Whether succeeding or failing in becoming something, it must be enjoyable.

Rowan smiled as she looked at Ludwig.

"Good luck, Ludwig."

Ludwig stood up from his seat, as if there was no worth in listening to Rowan's words any further, distancing himself like he was moving away from something filthy.

CHAPTER 617

"Are you really leaving? Today?"

"Yes."

"It seems a bit sudden, but… I guess there's nothing we can do."

Ellen didn't have much in the way of belongings. When she had come to this place, she had only brought a single cage containing a cat.

So, when returning to the allied forces' base, she would simply go back in her everyday clothes, without anything else to take with her.

"The snow has just stopped…"

Louise couldn't help but feel bitter at Ellen's decision to leave right after the terrible snowstorm had ceased and the weather had improved.

She had come back for a break, only to get involved in some strange incidents, which ultimately left her feeling even more burdened.

The Demon King had seized control of the Holy Knights and the Five Great Religions.

And there was nothing they could do about it.

In this rapidly changing era, there were no purely good factions; they had to choose the ones that could survive.

Something drastic was about to happen, and it would undoubtedly lead to countless bloodshed.

Dark clouds loomed over the empire's future, and it was now time for everyone to make a choice.

Ironically, the allied forces' base seemed more peaceful than the imperial capital, and it was a way to avoid getting involved in any more ominous incidents. This was

especially true for Ellen.

If they couldn't make a choice, it was better to go somewhere out of sight.

There were only unsolvable problems.

No one knew how these matters would eventually be resolved.

If the empire fell and the Demon King took its place,

What fate awaited Ellen, who should have been the Demon King's adversary?

And what position should Heinrich take?

No one had the answer.

Everyone was doing something, fearing the future. While everyone agreed that the Gate Incident must end, the actions they took while hoping for that made the aftermath even more frightening.

Was it truly right to turn the world into hell for the sake of a single absolute goal?

If so, what would become of the world after achieving that absolute goal?

Ellen believed that staying in the imperial capital was more dangerous.

That's why she was leaving.

But she had been thinking about it for a long time.

"Take good care of the cat when I'm gone."

“...I will."

However, the cat, which suddenly stopped appearing at some point, was nowhere to be found when she wanted to give it a final touch before leaving.

In the end, without seeing the cat, Ellen entrusted Heinrich with its care and left.

For some reason, she felt an instinctual premonition that it might have disappeared

entirely.

She had always felt that even if they were together, it would eventually leave.

Like she had always felt that way about someone.

She didn't know why, but she believed that there was nothing she could do if it suddenly vanished.

They had briefly spent time together, passing by each other, and she simply wished they would cross paths again someday.

It was a shame not to say goodbye.

In the end,

Ellen couldn't be overly attached to something so small.

"I'm leaving."

With the farewells from Louise and Heinrich, Ellen quietly left the temple dormitory.

Watching Ellen's retreating figure, Louise spoke.

"It seems like it's time for us to leave as well."

"It seems that's what we must do."

—---

It was true that danger lurked everywhere in the world, but at that moment, the imperial capital had undoubtedly become the most perilous place in some sense.

The heavy snowfall that had been coming down ceased, as if it had all been a lie, and melted away in an instant. Although the snow had piled up for a long time, it took only a few days for it to melt completely. The weather continued to be unusually warm, to the point where one might wonder if it was too warm.

Ellen walked along the streets of the temple, where the snow had melted. There was not much to do at the alliance's garrison, but in the capital, she learned too many

things she didn't need to know. If the goal was to fight anyway, she would rather have lived in ignorance.

She thought it was better to spend this winter knowing nothing than to lose her way amidst difficult and hard-to-decide matters. How long could she hold onto her seemingly fragile will? What would become of the world?

If she couldn't go anywhere, if she was being forcibly dragged along some path as if drawn by something, then she no longer wanted to see any path. If the ship was bound to sink someday, should it be abandoned? The empire, as well as her own consciousness. All she was doing was holding onto things that would eventually crumble.

While ending the Gate incident was the most pressing task at hand, everyone was already thinking about what would happen afterward. The Holy Knights, the empire, and countless other groups were undoubtedly considering the situation after the incident in their minds.

One by one.

Louise von Schwarz learned that the Holy Knights, a major pillar of the alliance, had fallen into the Demon King's clutches. What would happen if the strongest vassal state, Kernstadt, sided with the Demon King as well? With two of its main pillars gone, the empire could no longer be called an empire. The other vassal states would also inevitably face a crossroads of choice the moment this issue became clear.

Which side should they join?

The empire had already lost its legitimacy, and the Demon King was the mastermind behind the Gate incident. Both factions were groups that should disappear, but there was no other massive force to emerge and replace them. What if the empire became isolated? The empire had an undead army it could use even if it lost everything. There was a more powerful army than ever before.

Whether the crumbling empire struggled or sought to slaughter those who sided with the Demon King in order to maintain its strength, war would inevitably break out again.

"…"

Ellen knew where she stood. Whether victory was assured or ruin was imminent, she would side with the empire. As the will to disappear someday would be replaced by another will desiring the death of the Demon King, it was inevitable. Therefore, she would rather remain ignorant. The path she had to take was already determined, so there was no point in learning anything else.

In the end, she was destined to become an existence no different from the undead army, swallowed up by something. Although she could run away now when someone urged her to fight, eventually, she would lose even that ability. Whether she liked it or not, whether someone forced her or not, she was destined to become an opponent someday.

So, Ellen returned to the alliance's garrison, avoiding the atmosphere of division and chaos that enveloped the capital. The only goodness was there. The single, absolute goodness of ending the Gate incident.

—---

Thus, as Ellen walked along the snow-melted street, she reached the entrance of the temple.

There were still no people passing by.

But there, though no people were present, there was one small animal.

"Ah."

She saw a black cat sitting hunched in the sunlight that streamed down onto a nearby bench.

The cat turned its head to look at Ellen as she approached.

-Meow

Ellen walked toward the cat, which appeared to be enjoying the long-awaited sunshine on the bench.

It was a strange creature.

It would suddenly disappear somewhere, and then suddenly reappear.

When she gave up and tried to leave, thinking it wouldn't return, it would be waiting at the entrance as if it knew.

It wouldn't come when she waited.

But it would appear from somewhere when she gave up.

It was annoying, but somehow, irresistible.

Ellen squatted in front of the bench and met the cat's gaze at eye level.

They couldn't communicate.

But for some reason, Ellen always felt like they could understand each other.

As if it understood her sadness.

As if it understood her pain.

As if it felt her agony.

She thought it might be a delusion, but it didn't seem so.

Even now, like this.

It seemed like the cat was waiting for her at the entrance of the temple, knowing she was about to leave.

Did it really know, or was it just a coincidence?

Was she just attributing meaning to mere coincidences?

Yet, when coincidences piled up, they became inevitable.

The cat seemed to understand her heart too coincidentally.

"I'm leaving."

-Meow

Ellen said a simple goodbye.

Could she return?

What would the temple look like when she returned?

It was difficult to think that she could return for a good reason.

Would this small creature be safe in the face of the oncoming turmoil?

The alliance's base was dangerous, but so were the temple and the imperial capital.

Small beings were always swept away.

Just as people were swept away in the Gate incident, the fate of small beings had always been so.

But.

The small being in front of her.

An even smaller being than other small beings.

Perhaps because it was so small, when the wind blew, it blew as it pleased, and when the waves crashed, they crashed as they pleased.

Perhaps it could be safe precisely because it was so small.

Looking at the small black cat staring at her,

Recalling the moments when she found great comfort in the small being,

"Take care."

Sincerely saying that, she gently pressed her lips against the bridge of the cat's nose.

"And come back early."

-Meow

After playfully pretending to flick its forehead, Ellen headed toward the temple gate.

Having passed through the gate, Ellen looked up at the sky.

It was an early warm day, as if announcing the end of the bitterly cold winter.

But there had been so much snow.

With so much snow piled up, could one warm day melt it all?

With so much having fallen.

There must still be piles of snow in the shady places where the sunlight doesn't reach.

Who would melt the snow in the hidden, sunless places?

Ellen held the amulet still.

The amulet, which depicted the moon and the sun.

Holding it in her hand, she carefully rolled it around.

She was exhausted.

So tired and weary.

Was it time to let go?

If she was destined to fight anyway.

Would it be okay if everything ended like this?

If the evil and hatred of this world inevitably led to a situation where she had to fight.

What was the point of trying so hard to endure? No matter what she did, no matter what tricks she used, eventually, she would be forced to fight.

In that moment when she felt like giving up.

When a crack opened in her weakened heart.

Ellen's eyes sank deep.

No, had she already reached her limit long ago?

Beyond the limit of her limits, as if she had reached the critical point of her allotted time.

The sand dune of her ego was submerged beneath the rising water.

-Snap

All too easily, the leather strap of the amulet broke with a light tug.

As if it had never been precious, hanging around her neck to prevent it from falling.

As if finally freeing her from her shackles.

As if announcing the beginning of something liberated.

Ellen threw away the amulet she had been wearing like garbage and began to walk somewhere.

As if she had become something completely different from before.

As if she had become an entity unrelated to her past, Ellen left without looking back.

-…

The black cat cautiously picked up the round amulet that had fallen to the ground in its mouth and disappeared down an alley.

CHAPTER 618

Ellen had returned to the Allied Forces' base.

On the top floor of the Holy Knight Order's headquarters, in the commander's office, I sat.

In total, there were five of us seated there, including myself.

Olivia Lanze, who had essentially become the ruler of all factions.

Liana de Grantz, who was temporarily staying for climate control.

Rowan, the new Temple Knight Order commander.

And Harriet.

"Ellen returned to the Allied Forces?"

“…Yes, I suppose she did."

I answered Harriet's question. After all, the Allied Forces' camp would be quieter now, making it a better place for rest.

But I felt that something had changed.

It wasn't that she came back to the Imperial Capital to rest; rather, her return had led her to experience something even more difficult to endure.

And I was involved in that matter.

Not from the beginning, but eventually, it turned out that way.

Although it was bound to happen someday, seeing the back of Ellen, who had become an entirely different person, was not a pleasant feeling.

"As you commanded, I met with Ludwig."

Following my order, Rowan had met with Ludwig.

I asked her to talk to Ludwig.

Rowan, the weird newcomer who was certainly efficient at handling tasks.

Rowan had full control over the heretical forces in the refugee camp.

Rowan was indispensable for unifying the heretics. Like how we had to use Antirianus somehow, even if he was dangerous and sinister, we had to utilize her.

"I left him alone, as you told me not to do anything, but I think it would have been better to kill him."

"Why is that?"

"He gave off the impression that he would stab everyone and slit his own throat too."

At Rowan's eerie description, Harriet's eyes widened.

Everyone in the room, including myself, did not particularly like Rowan. To be precise, we couldn't like her.

We captured her only because her value was too high.

"That's exactly like you. What's the difference between what you've done?"

"I wouldn't want to face an enemy like myself."

Seeing her brush off the comment like that, it was absurd to think she knew how bizarre of a character she was.

"Anyway, leave him be."

"Do you not think he'll pose any significant threat?"

I remained silent at Rowan's question.

Instead, Olivia answered.

"Yeah, what could he possibly do?"

Everyone seemed to somewhat agree with Olivia's words. Even Rowan.

Ludwig could not be a threat.

No matter how twisted an individual is, there's only so much they can do.

He had even lost an arm.

The reason Rowan could do so much with her twisted nature was that she had been involved in extensive covert operations.

If Rowan had merely been a twisted Inquisitor or Holy Knight, there wouldn't have been much she could do.

But Ludwig was a mere individual with no faction or power.

We let Ludwig go because he was powerless.

Everyone might think that was my intention, but in fact, it wasn't.

"By the way, if you thought he wouldn't pose any significant threat, why did you order to meet Ludwig in the first place? We could have just left him alone."

If we didn't consider Ludwig a variable, there was no reason to send Rowan to meet him. And to all of us here, Ludwig was too small a human to ever become a variable.

"Come to think of it, you've always seemed to pay subtle attention to him. This time as well."

Harriet tilted her head as if recalling past events.

Although I didn't care more than necessary, I had been more sensitive to Ludwig's movements than the others.

And sadly,

I had been more shocked by Ludwig losing an arm than by Delphin's death.

Ludwig wasn't on bad terms with me, but we weren't close either. We were in different classes to begin with.

And now, Ludwig, who couldn't be a variable anymore and had even lost an arm.

There was no need to make him meet Rowan again and explain things to him. It would have been unfair, infuriating, and frustrating. But what could I do? There was no reason to care about Ludwig in such a state.

If I felt threatened, I should kill him.

If it wasn't a threat, there was no need to meet and talk.

Rowan seemed curious as to why I was unnecessarily concerned about Ludwig.

Because he was a classmate.

The others seemed to accept it that way, and Rowan had no choice but to think the same.

And in reality, I didn't intend to harm my classmates.

Even if they posed a threat or tried to kill me.

As long as that moment wasn't imminent, I didn't plan to kill them preemptively just because they might pose a threat.

If they actually had a knife at my throat, the story would be different, but I wouldn't act preemptively.

It might not be my only conscience, but it was my last line of defense.

I wouldn't cross that line.

If I started killing someone who was a classmate just because they were predicted to be a threat before actually becoming one, I was certain that more strange things would happen.

For personal reasons and the inexplicable absurdity of this world, I had no desire to kill Ludwig or any of the others with my own hands.

Until the moment I was forced to face a situation where I had to kill them, never.

"There's no particular reason."

There was no need to give a specific reason.

They wouldn't understand anyway.

Only I knew that Ludwig was originally the protagonist of this story.

They wouldn't understand, but if they did, it would be a problem.

Because then, the conversation about killing Ludwig would emerge.

Only I knew that it was strange for the protagonist, who should have been an important person at this point, to lose an arm and be stuck in limbo like this.

Incredibly complex and terrible things intertwined, leading to this bizarre outcome.

Numerous clues and incidents had already taken place, but the event that connected them was the creation of the Death Knight by them.

They had created the Death Knight in the Tomb of the Saints beneath the Holy Knight Headquarters.

Rowan began investigating that incident. From the start, Rowan knew that the heretics and the Demon God Cult couldn't have the scale to do such a thing. So, she conducted minimal investigations, tracking other forces as suspects.

Rowan believed that either the Demon King or the Empire was responsible for the incident.

The Demon King's location was unknown, but the Empire was right there on the land she stood upon.

In the midst of that, Ellen, Ludwig, and Eleion Bolton returned to the Imperial Capital.

Rowan had obtained information about Ludwig, a former Temple Royal class member, who had recently started working as a guard in the allied forces. Rowan had

deliberately approached Ludwig, hoping to build trust and gather information about the inner workings of the Temple.

However, while doing so, an order came to halt the investigation. Rowan ignored the order, and Eleion Bolton attempted to eliminate her. From that point on, Ellen pursued the case with Ludwig's help, following the leads she provided.

Ultimately, what we had done set other groups and individuals in motion. And in a roundabout way, the result was Rowan offering me control over the Holy Knights, the Five Great Churches, and the refugee camp.

It was completely unexpected.

When we created the Death Knight, we couldn't have imagined that things would turn out this way.

Now, Rowan knew that we were responsible for the undead incident.

Of course, she wasn't particularly surprised.

Every event has a purpose.

What had transpired would lead to some sort of conclusion.

Rowan understood that this was both an ending and a beginning.

I now knew that the world was constructed in such a way.

Of course, if I were to say this, others might think I was overthinking things, but I couldn't help it.

The complex series of events that originated from our actions in the tomb of the saints.

Was the true conclusion of these events my taking over the Holy Knights, the Five Great Churches, and the refugee camp?

Was that the real ending?

I sent Rowan to find out what Ludwig was thinking.

Ludwig was not someone to be ignored.

In fact, I was the only one who knew that he had the potential to become the strangest variable.

Ludwig.

Ludwig, who had lost his arm.

The four investigators eventually discovered what was happening within the empire.

And Ludwig found out about the collusion, conspiracy, and lies among the leaders and influential people of various factions.

Wasn't that the true ending?

Could the original protagonist really do nothing until the very end?

Was it possible for Ludwig to lose his role entirely?

The protagonist should get what they want.

The world is designed to give the protagonist what they want.

In one way or another.

I ended up taking what Ludwig was supposed to have: the Alsbringer.

If Ludwig were the protagonist of this world, and the world truly worked in such a way, then Ludwig wouldn't deviate from the course of the story.

I thought Ludwig was done for, but when he came back into my line of sight, I thought he wasn't finished yet.

It was impossible for Ludwig to leave the story, assuming that was correct.

Ludwig had to get what he wanted, which was revenge, and the means to achieve it would naturally be power.

Ludwig had become useless and had even lost his arm.

No.

From the start, should I have changed my perspective?

Had he not lost his arm?

I finally understood.

I finally realized.

"So that's… what it was…"

In order to give something.

I had to take something away from the beginning.

He didn't lose his arm.

Taking his arm was, in itself, the beginning of giving him something.

From the beginning, it wasn't about being disqualified. Rather, losing his arm was the pivotal event that brought him onto the path.

"What's that, by the way?"

As I mumbled words that I didn't understand, Harriet was looking at my hand.

"Ah, this."

The object that I had been rolling in my hand throughout our conversation.

"I don't know."

"I see."

I didn't know. I didn't know why I had taken it.

I didn't know what it meant.

It seemed like a meaningless object for Ellen, who felt like she had crossed some

kind of end.

But still, it shouldn't have been discarded.

I put the round, white amulet into my pocket.

Nighttime.

A dark night when even the researchers were asleep.

But in the deep, deep underground laboratory where day and night became meaningless.

Even in the isolation chamber at the deepest part of the lab.

There were four people there.

Christina, arranging the prepared drugs and reagents in order.

Anna de Gerna, drawing a magic circle.

Louis Ancton, checking the magical tools and ritual equipment.

And.

In the center of the magic circle.

There lay Ludwig, shirtless.

Wearing a mask, Christina checked the tools, more suited for primitive surgery than for a mage, and said,

"Think it over again."

"Please."

"I've told you dozens of times that you could die."

"I've thought about it a lot."

At Ludwig's words, Christina frowned.

"We can find an arm from a living person, someone who hasn't been dead long. The success rate would be higher. It wouldn't be difficult to obtain. Just wait a little longer, and we can find an arm that's safe and ethically unproblematic."

"You know that's not what I want anymore, Christina."

"…"

Christina had tried several times to change Ludwig's mind, but she couldn't.

"Ludwig… Do you really have to do this…?"

At Anna's words, Ludwig nodded his head.

"I want to become stronger."

"…"

"I don't know any other way, because I'm powerless."

Fortunately, they weren't the only ones who ignored Ludwig and deemed him insignificant.

He had friends who didn't consider him nothing.

An extremely dangerous ritual with a high possibility of death.

But still, he wanted to undergo the most perilous one.

There were also those who could help Ludwig. Anna and Christina both knew they couldn't persuade him.

However, wanting to do it didn't mean they could do it right away, and they couldn't cast such a dangerous spell on their friend's body without proper preparation.

So, all three of them carefully checked Ludwig's condition, gave him medication for

several days beforehand, and tried to create the best possible state for him.

As a result.

Louis spoke from outside the magic circle.

"Ludwig, I've done a thorough check of your physical condition, and you're quite different from others. Quite a lot."

"Different?"

"Abnormal, to be precise."

As Louis examined the data he had collected, he wore a serious expression, checking something.

Anna and Christina were already aware of this information.

At Louis's words, Ludwig looked puzzled as he lay there.

"To put it simply, your talent is really strange."

Before starting anything, Louis Ancton had meticulously examined Ludwig's physical condition and discovered a very peculiar aspect.

Other students of the same level had powerful supernatural abilities, or two or three, or even talents that encompassed other abilities. In Ellen's case, she possessed numerous such comprehensive talents.

However, Ludwig had only one talent: physical stamina.

A talent corresponding to the B-class of the Royal Class.

Ludwig never considered his talent exceptional.

But he was the only one with the talent of physical stamina.

"A strange talent?"

"I thought your talent was related to endurance or physical stamina, but it seems it's

not."

"Ludwig."

Christina took over Louis's words.

Wearing tight gloves and a mask, she looked at him.

"It seems your talent is closer to vitality rather than stamina."

He had always thought his only advantage was not getting tired.

A talent related to vitality rather than stamina.

Ludwig didn't know the specific meaning of this.

Was the one talent he thought he had actually quite remarkable?

In any case, there was no need to know the specifics.

"Anyway, for now… that's a good thing, right?"

In a moment of success or failure, the talent could provide assistance.

He could understand that much.

"Yes, your chances of not dying are much higher than others."

"That's a relief."

"Of course, that doesn't necessarily mean you'll succeed. Keep that in mind."

"Understood."

Ludwig was born with an abnormally high level of vitality.

It wasn't a simple matter of muscular strength or endurance.

The very source of life.

As if under the protection of something unfathomable, Louis Ancton had discovered that Ludwig had some strange power.

Vitality.

Louis confirmed that it was indeed a bizarre and alien talent.

After a while, Anna finished the magic circle and stepped back. Louis took something out of the prepared container.

It was an arm.

Something in the shape of a right arm.

As Louis brought the arm, Ludwig asked,

"Can I ask whose arm it is?"

Louis carefully placed the arm where Ludwig's right arm should have been.

"Larken Simonstite."

"I see."

Hearing the name, Ludwig slightly closed his eyes. It wasn't an unfamiliar name to him.

Larken Simonstite.

The traitor of humanity who had become a Grandmaster.

Saviolin Turner's predecessor, humanity's strongest.

His right arm was placed where Ludwig's arm should be.

Louis stepped back, and Christina approached Ludwig with her gloves and mask on.

It was uncertain how much would change by receiving just one arm.

However, one thing was clear: something unexpected would happen.

It was a simple transplant, but the arm being transplanted had once belonged to a man who was mentioned among the world's strongest, and had been further enhanced by dark magic and alchemy before being regenerated.

If the transplant and adaptation were successful, something unpredictable would happen.

With the arm of a traitor to humanity, would he annihilate humanity's enemies?

"Now that it's come to this, I'll make sure we succeed, Ludwig."

"I'm counting on you."

"Together, let's take revenge on the world."

A gleam appeared in Christina's eyes.

"We'll make everyone pay for all of this."

Although she had tried to give up and resign herself, once she had resolved to act, Christina could not help but think of joining forces with Ludwig.

Seeing Christina's eyes flicker with madness and vengeance, Ludwig looked up at the ceiling.

"That's right… a price."

"We must make them pay."

"I'm stupid."

"But no more will I ask others for their opinions, or seek affirmation that my judgment is correct."

"I may be wrong, I may be making a mistake, but I won't look for answers from others anymore."

"If I'm wrong, then so be it."

"If I'm right, then so be it."

"I will follow the path I have chosen."

"Everyone must have had their reasons."

"There must have been some reason, and perhaps it was something they had no choice but to accept."

"But if that's the case…"

"I can do the same."

"I can be like this too."

"I must accept my own helplessness."

"Just as they justify many things by saying they had no choice."

"I will justify myself, that in this world they've created, I had no choice but to become this person."

"It's allowed, isn't it?"

"If it was allowed for them, I think it's allowed for me too."

"Revenge…"

"Well, I don't think it's revenge."

"This is… yes, in their favorite words."

"It's not revenge or retribution…"

Ludwig spoke.

"It's just… an inevitable occurrence, I suppose."

Fate disguised as coincidence intertwined and intermingled.

The phrase 'there was no choice' repeated and accumulated.

Another inevitability.

It had arrived at a destination and starting point.

CHAPTER 619

Swoosh -

The wind blew gently, causing the blue grass to ripple like waves across the plain.

Clang! -

As the swords clashed, a shockwave exploded, scattering leaves, shattering the ground, and dispersing fragments of the magical barrier.

Thud! Bang! Crash! -

From the gleaming dark blade, a sharp and thick trace of void darkness was drawn, and I busily danced around it, either dodging or parrying the sword.

A few times like this.

No, many times like this.

I couldn't even remember the count anymore.

I couldn't count the days and nights I had been dying.

It almost felt like a frenzy now.

A frenzy on the battlefield.

Crash! -

Along with the Alsbringer slipping from my grasp, the dark sword approached my throat.

Swish! -

The Void Sword Lament grazed my neck, and an eerie pain swept through my mind.

A blackout of consciousness.

“……Phew."

And then I awoke.

Once again, I stood in the plains, facing Ellen, who stood across from me in the same posture as before. This time, I drew out Tiamata.

In the midst of this training to prevent the inevitable death that would someday come.

I felt more accustomed to defeat and death than victory.

"Please, lose just once."

"…”

The dream version of Ellen never said a word.

She just charged.

Shriek! -

Ellen, who seemed to ride on the breeze, thrust her Void Sword at me.

The dream battles had long surpassed a thousand.

I still couldn't do more than endure against Ellen.

"Why don't you just get some rest? It should be fine to sleep comfortably for one day out of three, right?"

Upon waking up, Airi, who had her hand on my forehead, asked me with a worried look.

My forehead, and indeed my entire body, was drenched in cold sweat.

It was only natural.

Dying dozens of times in my dreams, it would be strange if my body didn't react. On the contrary, I would be scared of how accustomed I had become to death.

Sometimes, I wanted to give up this practice, afraid that when it came time to fight for real, I would think it was just a dream and give in.

"I can sleep comfortably for the rest of my life when I'm dead."

“…….Stop saying such ominous things."

Airi's expression darkened when I repeated a phrase I had heard somewhere.

Morning.

More than two months had passed since the burnt Church incident.

The 3rd month.

The long winter was over, and spring had arrived.

A spring of departure.

A spring of marching.

"The Allied Forces have almost finished preparing for departure. As you know, their destination is Grenosia."

At Harriet's words, everyone seated nodded.

The Allied Forces had completed their reorganization and were now ready to march toward their next destination.

For the army that had been marching for so long, was this rest short or long?

It might not be an exaggeration to say that it had passed in an instant.

However, just as I hadn't spent that time idly, the Allied Forces had been busy during that short period.

Sarkegaar spoke up next.

"Your Majesty, I have news that the improvements to the Titan have been completed."

"By how much?"

"It seems that it can now operate for more than five times the original duration."

"So around 30 to 40 minutes?"

"Yes, it appears that additional weaponry has also been installed."

The Titan could originally only move for about seven minutes.

However, Adelia, the Archduke, and his corps of mages had begun work to improve the titan.

In just three months, they managed to achieve the impressive feat of increasing the titan's operating time by five times.

Sarkegaar's reconnaissance report on the Allied Forces had come to an end.

Next up was Olivia Lanze.

"We're making good progress."

"…"

"Alright. We've managed to completely infiltrate the high-ranking clergy, and now the indoctrination is primarily focused on the lower-ranking priests. Of course, discreetly."

"How is the heretic capture policy progressing?"

"It's a sensitive issue. We've been approaching cautiously since the announcement of the heretic policy, as you know. If we act recklessly, the past incidents could repeat

themselves. For now, we need to properly arm the priests within the sect with the right mindset. It's still in progress. We didn't expect it to be done quickly, did we?"

"What about Rowan?"

"You know that her mental issues are problematic from top to bottom, but in terms of her work, she's flawless. Honestly, don't you think that madwoman will be the most loyal to you here? Just be careful not to let her excessive loyalty lead to strange actions."

"That's true."

Absorbing the Five Great Religions had been an inevitable event.

However, getting all the priests of the Five Great Religions to accept the Demon God Cult in such a short time was not possible.

Moreover, capturing all heretics, including the heretic tolerance policy, would take even more time.

Thus, until the firm control and conversion of the Five Great Religions to our liking was complete, we could not afford to act hastily.

Although the leaders were all captured by us, the majority of the lower-ranking priests were unaware of this fact.

As there was no need to worry about external interference, we only had to be concerned about collapsing from within.

Reforming the Holy Knights and the Five Great Religions from the inside out.

It was uncertain whether "reforming" was the right word for it.

And we didn't just absorb the Five Great Religions.

"How is our Demon God Cult leader?"

"The integration process is going smoothly. We can assume that about 60% of the consolidation is complete. Now that the pace has picked up, the majority of the Demon God Cult followers will soon share a unified belief."

Antirianus said with a sinister smile.

It was fitting, in a way.

Since Rowan was the nominal leader of the Holy Knights, Antirianus was in charge of integrating the Demon God Cult followers and the Hero Religion followers in the refugee camp.

Regrettably, there was no one as diligent in this malicious task as him, making Antirianus the only suitable candidate.

We didn't initially plan on having Antirianus do it. But when we asked who would do it, the old man raised his hand with a child-like expression.

After integrating the Demon God Cult followers, we would integrate the Five Great Religions once we believed it had been adequately modified.

In no time, the group would become a nation-like entity on a nearly tasteless continent.

"I've always told you not to do unnecessary things."

"Is there any doubt? Your Greatness."

The commonality between Rowan and Antirianus.

They were reliable, but there was always a crucial element of uncertainty.

Antirianus had a habit of causing trouble at the worst possible time, while Rowan was loyal to me but had the potential to act on her own judgment and engage in strange behavior.

There was a saying that one would borrow even the hands of a bracken fern when in need of help.

That was wrong.

A bracken fern's hands would not be unstable.

In many ways, they were out of options and had to use whatever they could. It felt as

if they were not borrowing the hands of a bracken fern, but rather, the hands of a demon.

Allied Forces' preparations for the expedition were completed.

Titan's improvements confirmed.

Smooth progress in the Five Great Religions operation.

Smooth progress in the integration of the followers of the Demon God Cult and Hero Religion.

And then again.

Looking at Eleris.

"The deployment of the Alliance Immortal forces has been confirmed."

“…I see."

Immortal.

The Empire had secretly decided to call them that.

"They won't be able to deploy openly, but they seem to be planning to move as they did before, scouting the battlefield in advance and eliminating small-scale gates beforehand."

"The Empire has decided to deploy only the most elite among the Immortals."

"The deployment scale consists of 3,000 Master Class, 10 Grandmasters, and 1,000 Archmages. Strictly speaking, the possibility is high that they alone could be capable of capturing a major city."

"Moreover, we have confirmed that they can instantly regenerate from a certain degree of damage."

"It seems that they can also be recovered and restored after being severely damaged."

Three thousand Master Class, each one able to be considered among humanity's strongest.

One thousand mages, each one capable of casting mass teleportation.

And ten Grandmasters, a number not so common throughout history.

Some of the Grandmasters were even at the level of Archmages.

There had been many geniuses in history.

All those geniuses had come back from death.

It was humanity's strongest army.

No, it was probably the strongest army in history.

Since they were already dead, they could not be injured, and their wounds could regenerate if they were minor.

Even if they were severely damaged, they would automatically return to the underground laboratory of the Temple Magic University and be automatically restored.

It was an army of disaster.

The Gate Incident was as good as over.

Frankly, if they found out that they could suppress a super-large Warp Gate with just their army after a test deployment, the Allied Forces could simply withdraw right there.

The army was a problem, but they were focusing on another issue.

"How about cloning?"

"It doesn't seem possible at the moment, but it's inevitable that they'll be researching it. We should keep it in mind, but even from the Empire's standpoint, it seems they would be hesitant to go that far."

They were golems, animated by infusing black magic into alchemy.

It was frightening to think about what would happen if the already fearsome army became capable of cloning.

They felt the fear of dangerous technology on their skin.

They were moving towards the same goal now, but when that power turned towards them.

Inevitably, they had to think about that moment.

"If, in order to end the Gate Incident, a technology was developed that made the Gate Incident no longer exist… I still don't know if that's a good thing."

They couldn't help but agree with Charlotte's worried statement.

It seemed like the Gate Incident would be resolved smoothly as it was.

But what would happen if they had taken on too many dangerous tasks to overcome the crisis?

They couldn't do anything about that anxiety.

"Maybe there's no need to think too hard about it. In the end, the Immortals are just machines without free will, no matter how strong they are. If we really need to suppress them, it's a matter of suppressing the controller, not the machines."

There was plenty of truth in Lucinil's words.

To subdue a tank, there wasn't necessarily a need to create magic that could destroy the tank itself.

Magic that could snipe the personnel inside the tank would be more than enough.

In the end, the Immortals were just golems in human form, controlled by someone.

That control mechanism, or the controller.

If only they could get a hold of that, the Immortals would be nothing more than

empty shells in human form.

But would that be possible?

Of course, I knew that the opponent we needed to subdue was not limited to just the Empire.

"The important thing is, they know it too."

"They probably do. They're not fools, after all."

Whether it was the Empire or those who directly operated the Immortals, they must be fully aware of the weaknesses in the operation of the Immortals. They couldn't help but consider the weaknesses that we could think of as well.

If they recklessly meddled without proper preparation, the Immortals could go berserk.

If that happened, it would be the end of everything.

"Anyway, the Immortals won't be used to attack us for now, but it would be good to keep looking into ways to neutralize or counter them."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The march resumed.

The transformed Allied Forces would head towards the conclusion of the Gate incident within the changed circumstances.

Lastly, I looked at Charlotte.

Having been adequately informed about external matters, it was time to share the internal situation.

"The resettlement of the refugees is almost complete. The overpopulation issue in Lazak will be significantly alleviated now. The establishment of the local administrative branches has been completed, and there seems to be no need to worry about security issues."

Distributing the overpopulated population of Lazak to various places in the provinces.

It was a task that had not been carried out properly until now, as the stability of the local administrative branches was in doubt. Strengthening control over the provinces would weaken the overall control, which wouldn't be good at all.

But Charlotte had succeeded in properly establishing the local administrative system.

She maintained security and created a system that could convey administrative power and report back.

With that, it finally transformed into a proper nation.

"Keep focusing on the establishment and stabilization of the local administrative branches. If the situation becomes unfavorable, we may have to bring the heretics and Demon God Cult believers from the Imperial Capital here."

Work was being completed one by one.

They prepared while considering everything.

However.

They couldn't help but worry about whether they would end up not preparing anything at all.

The Council of Elders meeting had ended.

The task we were doing, scouting the battlefield at the forefront and annihilating the enemy through preemptive strikes, was halted for now at this stage.

The Immortals would take our place.

And it was clear that the Immortals would be able to do the job much more accurately and reliably than us. The scale was enough to make one's bones shudder just by hearing it.

If it wasn't an attack on a large-scale city, there might be no need for us to participate in the battle any longer.

Perhaps we should be quietly holding our breath, thinking about what would happen after the Gate incident.

"Reinhardt, do you have a moment?"

Following the end of the meeting, Harriet trailed behind me.

"Plenty."

“…Well, I know it's not what you're supposed to say when I ask if you have time, but aren't you not supposed to have too much time?"

Oh.

That's true.

I'm not supposed to have too much time, am I?

"I have plenty of time for you."

If I don't have it, I should force myself to make it.

Huh.

Not good.

As expected, my words made her face flush with anger.

"You, you crazy bastard…!"

"Argh! Why are you whining even if I have time!"

"Now, now you're saying such shameless things without any hesitation! What if someone hears this!"

"So what if they hear! Are we strangers or what? Huh?"

Well, we're not exactly strangers.

But to be honest.

We're not exactly close either, right?

That kind of relationship where we became strangers when we turned our backs…

That's what it was…

"Shut up!"

I was struck several times by her.

Of course, as always, it didn't hurt one bit.

CHAPTER 620

They had spent so much time together, yet Harriet's chronic condition of habitual flushing had still not been cured.

That being said, it was a good thing.

The place Harriet dragged me to, with her face flushed red, was her laboratory in Lazak.

Every time I saw this place, I couldn't help but feel genuinely sorry.

I couldn't help but think of the massive research facility that was once located in the underground of the Temple Magic University.

Such a facility and scale were available for a single project.

Harriet's private laboratory was obviously not as well-equipped. Even then, Harriet had either made the equipment herself when she needed it or had consulted with the Vampire Lords of the Elder Council to create them together.

If Harriet had access to those massive research facilities at the Temple Magic University, what could she have achieved? I knew it was laughable to assume, but I couldn't help but feel sorry every time I saw it.

There was no need to go all the way to the Temple Magic University.

Frankly, the magic research facilities in Lazak were not even on par with the club facilities at the Temple Era Magic Research Club. Although, initially, it was a research lab for a professor-level mage.

Our Harriet.

It felt like watching a daughter with the wrong father, knitting her own socks in a rundown house.

In reality, she was a princess.

Seeing her trying to do something with whatever resources she had, I couldn't help but wonder if our Harriet was actually a resilient person.

She possessed the greatest talent in history but had met a man who couldn't support her, leaving her unable to fully showcase her abilities.

What should I do?

I'm the biggest obstacle in Harriet's life.

While others were creating Titans and armies with the name Immortal, our Harriet, who had no inferior talent and was arguably even more talented, was struggling in this attic-like laboratory because she had met the wrong man!

"I'm sorry."

“…Suddenly? For what?"

"I'm just sorry for everything."

"What are you talking about? It's out of the blue."

Harriet pouted as she told me not to say such random things.

I felt even more sorry and heartbroken because she had no complaints.

"Anyway, what is it?"

I admit that this is my nature to speak this way even though I think differently.

"Look at this."

Harriet pointed to a flat metal plate.

Many patterns were drawn on it, and to be precise, it looked like some sort of stand. Given the slightly convex protrusions, it also looked like a machine of some sort.

And it wasn't just one.

There were two plates.

"Harriet, I'm not a genius like you who can tell what it is just by looking at it. You have to explain it to me."

"Make up your mind, am I a genius or a blockhead?"

You're a genius, not a blockhead.

Right? That was a strange thing to say.

"Uh, Harriet."

“…Really!"

-Thwack!

"I told you to choose one!"

"Be quiet!"

She hit me even though I did as she asked!

Anyway.

There would be no end to our bickering.

I couldn't stop because it was fun.

Harriet knew this, so sometimes she would only say what she wanted when I kept fooling around.

Harriet placed the pair of metal plates on either end of the desk.

"Now, if I do this… hmm."

As Harriet began to fiddle with them, the thin plates started to move and take shape.

From what was once a stand, several metal sheets popped out, and it transformed into some sort of holder.

It might be described as a table with three legs turned upside down.

Harriet did the same thing again, this time with another metal plate.

Something that looked like a pair of brackets.

Harriet brought something that looked like a metal rod from among the clutter in the lab.

It had been the same at the temple.

Our blockhead didn't really clean up.

She said she knew where everything was and didn't need to put things away.

"Look."

-Screech! Sizzle!

Soon, blue sparks began to fly from a pair of metal plates.

“…Isn't that dangerous?"

"It's not dangerous. It's my first time trying it for real, though."

"How do you know if it's dangerous or not before you actually try it!"

"My theory couldn't be wrong."

Ah.

It was something like math, wasn't it?

If the formula was correct, then implementing it in reality shouldn't yield different results.

She must have run the simulation in her mind.

It wouldn't work for me, but it probably would for our blockhead.

"Then it's not dangerous."

“…I really don't know whether you trust me or not."

-Crack! Snap! Screeeech!

Soon, sparks began to fly from the sharp edges of the metal plates, and they started to glow blue.

The blue light gradually took on the shape of a sphere.

A pair of blue spheres.

Inside the blue spheres was pitch black.

Could this be?

"Ready."

Harriet inserted a metal rod-like object into the left sphere.

And then.

-Thump

The metal rod popped out of the right sphere, fell onto the desk, rolled around, and then dropped to the floor without any momentum.

There was no way not to know what this was.

"Hey… this is…”

"Yep."

Harriet smiled.

"It's a warp gate. A new warp gate that's unrelated to the Gate Incident."

Our girl had done it again.

In this shabby and crude environment.

She had caused another major accident.

"Is this… even possible?"

"It is possible, that's why I did it, dummy."

"You… you…!"

-Whack!

"Ouch! That hurts!"

"You're really the greatest blockhead!"

"What are you even saying!"

What are logistics and distribution?

Honestly, I still don't know the details.

I only know that it's very important.

And I also know that the golden age of the empire didn't come from the conquest of the demon realm, but was originated from the warp gates.

The golden age of humanity, and the golden age of the empire.

It was not because people could travel through the warp gates, but because logistics could pass through them.

The development of transportation and logistics brings about rapid urbanization of society.

Rapid development of logistics enables specialization.

Before the development of logistics, most cities had to be self-sufficient around major cities.

In terms of food, commerce, and manufacturing.

To some extent, they had to be self-sufficient.

However, when logistics and distribution develop to an extreme level, cities specialized in commerce or manufacturing don't need to produce any food at all. Of course, they can just import it. And that can be done by cities or countries with specialized agricultural environments.

For example, let's say there is a mine containing a large amount of magic stones in a cold-climate city.

If distribution is unstable, the city must have a system in place to provide a certain amount of food in the cold climate, making it difficult for people to live there. Consequently, development would also be difficult.

But what if there were a warp gate?

With imported food, the city could focus on mining the abundant magic stones in its mines.

The reason the Imperial Capital, became the largest city in the empire was because it had the most warp gates.

People flocked there, along with goods and resources.

Naturally, the Imperial Capital became the largest city.

The food problem in the Imperial Capital was initially due to the fact that it wasn't an agricultural city.

With distribution cut off and unable to sustain itself, the city had to produce its own food.

So, the empire forced farming and land reclamation, producing and supplying food in secure areas of other regions.

However, without the overwhelmingly convenient distribution facilities of warp gates, all tasks had to be solved through the mass teleportation of archmages.

Not only was production itself insufficient, but if production took place outside the Imperial Capital, highly-skilled archmages would be wasted on mere resource transportation.

After the Gate Incident, warp gate technology became completely worthless.

The reason was simple.

Monsters from the gates had taken over the so-called imaginary dimension as it turned into a real dimension.

Of course, it wasn't that they couldn't create warp gates.

They could.

It was just that monsters would pour out of them.

"So, you created a secondary imaginary dimension?"

"Yeah."

"I don't know much about it, but people didn't do it before because they couldn't think of it, right?"

"Probably not?"

It was one of the few times I had such a thought.

I wanted to hug Harriet tightly and give her hundreds of kisses.

"So, you were able to do it because you're incredibly amazing, right?"

What others couldn't do even with the best facilities was accomplished by her in this bare-minimum place, right?

At my words, Harriet's face turned red, and she fidgeted with her fingers.

“…I, I don't want to say it like that."

"Right or wrong. Just say it."

"Uh… right…”

She knew how great her accomplishment was.

Despite accomplishing a huge feat, she looked embarrassed, twisting her body.

She looked a thousand times cuter and more amazing than usual.

"Let me hug you, our genius."

"No, I hate it!"

"Why not!"

"It feels like you're praising a dog or something!"

"No, who's treating you like a dog?"

In the end, even after doing something great or not, we ended up bickering as always.

What was it like to create a new imaginary dimension?

I didn't know much, but warp gates were not an invention created by a single mage.

According to what I heard from Archduke of Saint-Owan, it was a project pushed forward by the emperor a long time ago, almost risking the fate of the empire.

The best mages of that time would have been involved, and it would have been the result of the collective efforts of the top mages of the time over a very long period.

Warp gates were the result of accumulated research and experiments over a very long time.

Harriet had done it alone, something that wasn't just the achievement of one person. And she did it here, without proper facilities or equipment.

From the beginning, Harriet had gone through all the research materials related to warp gates while claiming to study dimensional magic when I couldn't grasp the cause of the Gate Incident.

Harriet already had the accumulated knowledge in her head, so the stage before developing warp gates wouldn't be exactly the same.

However, the fact that Harriet accomplished what no one else could remain unchanged.

Anyway, unlike the original, Harriet's purpose was not to engage in battles, although she did participate in them. She wasn't always on the battlefield.

So, in the end, even though it was crude, she had time to think and found her own way to revive warp gate technology.

Of course, it seems clear that Harriet's research on warp gates, which she originally should not have known about, played a significant role due to my involvement.

The truth before my eyes.

Harriet had succeeded in devising a new warp gate system.

"How far can you go with this?"

"Since I tested it just to see if it works or not, it’s certainly short. The distance will naturally increase when it's scaled up. It's difficult to use it for any purpose at this level."

"Assuming we have the resources to scale it up?"

"It wouldn't be much different from the existing warp gates. You know warp gates connect with all other warp gates within their reach, right?"

"I know."

"And, do you remember that I configured the network between warp gates, creating gate passages directly to the destination without wandering around?"

"Somewhat."

The existing warp gate system, in other words, was like a randomly built subway line with too many transfer stations – like spaghetti code.

It was like the very first subway stations that were built were terribly outdated. Although the outdated aspect was not visible.

But Harriet designed this from scratch.

There was no need to disembark at gate waypoints and board again, disembark and board again, as with long-distance travel in the past.

"So, to travel long distances, we need a waypoint in between, right? Building a Nexus to connect the gates?"

"Nexus…?"

"We need a connection point for amplifying warp gate signals. It serves as a waypoint among the warp gate functions, but people don't actually pass through it."

"Did you develop that as well? That quickly?"

“…Of course not. It's just that if you make only half of a warp gate, it becomes a Nexus."

“…Huh?"

"Don't you understand?"

"Of course not."

Teacher, I don't understand what you're saying.

Harriet draws a diagram.

1 - 2 - 3

"Let's say it's a straight path."

"Yes, senior."

“…What are you saying?"

"No, go on with the explanation."

"So, normally, you have to complete all the warp gates for points 1, 2, and 3 to be connected."

"That's right."

"But now, since most of the cities are destroyed, there's no need to build warp gates in every location. Right? There's not even a city at point 2. But we want to connect points 1 and 3. However, points 1 and 3 are too far away. Let's assume that."

"Uh-huh."

“At first, there is no need to fully complete the warp gate at point 2; it is only necessary to build half of it to serve as a transfer point. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Like a stepping stone?"

"Exactly."

I finally understood the meaning.

"In the previous warp gate technology, we had to build a warp gate at point 2 as well. However, that would mean that unnecessary resources would be invested in building a warp gate at point 2, which would only be used as a transfer point. By shortening that process and recognizing that there's no actual need for people to come and go at point 2, it would suffice to have a structure there that only performs certain functions of the warp gate. The term 'Nexus' is a convenient name, and if you just build a small part of the warp gate, it can serve as a Nexus. If later on it seems necessary to build a warp gate at point 2 as well, we can complete the half-built Nexus into a warp gate since they're fundamentally the same structure."

Hmm.

I still couldn't fully understand, but I grasped enough of what was being said.

It was like setting up a temporary station, connecting it first, and then completing it into a proper station when needed.

And more importantly.

The cost of connecting the entire continent with warp gates could be astronomically reduced. The inefficient technology that had persisted since its development had completely disappeared, and now a completely efficient operation was possible.

Harriet smiled at me, who had half-understood what she was saying.

"Do you know why I've been telling you this long story?"

"How should I praise you?"

“…What do you think of me?"

Harriet narrowed her eyes, saying she didn't say all that just to get a compliment.

"The point is that it's not impossible to connect the Empire and Edina with warp gates. It can now be done at a much lower cost."

I couldn't help but widen my eyes at her words.

Connecting the Empire and Edina with warp gates was an extremely dangerous thing to do.

The Empire still didn't know where we were. That's why we could be safe.

But Harriet certainly wasn't saying this because she wanted to destroy Edina.

"We can bring the anti-Imperial forces on the Imperial Capital directly to Edina. Then, nobody would have to get hurt."

"…”

"Weren't you thinking about leading all those people out of the Imperial Capital when the situation explodes? You know that's impossible."

The seeds of division had already been sown and sprouted, and they were growing.

At some point, when this division became apparent, a huge number of people would die.

There was an option to topple the Empire.

And another option.

I could lead those who followed me away from the Imperial Capital, heading endlessly south toward Edina.

Would it be war or a great journey?

Both options would clearly result in the sacrifice of a great number of people.

Driving people into the jaws of death in an attempt to avoid war would be foolish.

But would it be wise to start a civil war in Imperial Capital the moment this division became apparent?

I hadn't chosen what to do.

I was just thinking that I might have to do it.

Connecting the Empire and Edina with warp gates was undeniably a very dangerous thing to do.

However, if tens of millions of people could be divided without fighting because of it, it would be better than the great journey.

"It doesn't have to be that way."

"…"

"But we've gained a new possibility, and even if it's not this way, we've obtained a necessary means to rebuild the world."

Depending on its use, the warp gate could be a technology for war or for prosperity and reconstruction.

"And for now, I'm focusing on connecting the archipelago. If the travel time between the islands is reduced, not only will unity increase, but the central administration's control will also grow stronger. You know there was a reason the empire's authority was absolute after the development of the warp gate, right?"

First, reconnect the whole islands in Edina Archipelago with the warp gate.

The next task would be the next task.

It was amazing that such a world-changing technology had come from such a small, cute head.

"I'll grant you one wish. What is it?"

With this mood, I could do anything!

Even if you asked me to bite my tongue and die, I could do it!

What do you want!

I'll do it all!

"Don't be so serious… Well…”

"No, it's not just one. Just say it! Anything! Just! Whatever! I'll do it all!"

"That's too much pressure!"

Harriet seemed to not have expected my passionate response, and after hesitating for a long time, she sighed.

"Never mind, just turn into a cat."

Wait.

What?

Suddenly?

"But I did that last time too…!"

She, too, was a severe cat syndrome patient, just like Ellen?

She kept asking me whenever she get the chance!

And was that all?

"Is that a no?"

She looked at me as if to say, you acted like you'd do anything, but you can't even do that?

Well.

If the price for creating a new warp gate was that…

It might feel like too much of a bargain…

"Are you going to do it?"

“…Of course."

In the end, that night.

I had to fall asleep with her holding me in the form of a cat.

Honestly, wasn’t this just basically a win for me…?

I thought that, too.

CHAPTER 621

The next day.

“…I know now."

-…

"You actually enjoy this quite a bit."

As I was being carried in Harriet's arms, passing through the corridor, Charlotte, who bumped into us, said that with a slightly troubled expression as she looked at me in my cat form.

-Meow!

"And pretending not to enjoy it like this makes me even angrier."

No!

I didn't enjoy it that much!

In the first place, it was Harriet who asked for it!

"Why? It's cute."

Of course, Harriet was vigorously stroking my head.

Yeah.

How could I not do it when she liked it this much? Huh?

"It's not that I disagree, but this will only make a bad habit worse."

That's a bit harsh.

Not that it will worsen the habit, but that the bad habit was already there and would

get worse.

Anyway, my habits weren't exactly good to begin with.

"Anyway, lend him to me for a while. I have something to talk about."

"Uh? Oh, okay."

Harriet hesitantly handed me over to Charlotte.

Of course, our (former) princess showed no mercy.

-Thud!

The princess grabbed me by the scruff of my neck.

-Hiss!

"Hey, hey! You can't do that!"

"It's not even a real cat, so what's the problem? And besides, what does it matter if it were a real cat? It's a world where people treat each other like that anyway."

Harriet fretted, asking Charlotte not to be so rough, but Charlotte paid no attention.

"I'll come to pick him up later."

"Uhh…"

-Meow! Meow!

"Quiet."

-…

If I made any more fuss, I felt like I'd be swung around a few times, so I hung there quietly.

Not everyone likes cats.

Of course, it seemed less like disliking cats and more like disliking me pretending to be a cat.

Charlotte took me to her office and sat me down in a chair.

I naturally returned to my human form. Charlotte sat opposite me, resting her chin on her palm and gazing at me intently.

"There's a lot I'm grateful to you for, and I really like you, but you're such an exceptionally weird pervert. I didn't think it'd be this bad."

That's true.

I never thought I'd have this kind of taste.

But isn't this enjoyable?

Do you know how many people just pass by if you're cute?

Even those who know who I am laugh at me.

To what extent? Even Gallarush didn't have a bad reaction, right? Isn't it all said and done if I'm eaten by an orc vampire?

No, was it because it was unbelievable?

"Since you like me, please like this part of me too."

"…"

"…I'm sorry."

I got goosebumps all over my body when Charlotte suddenly looked serious.

Let's not go overboard with everything.

Charlotte's red eyes stared at me.

"By the way, is there something you couldn't say during yesterday's meeting?"

"It's not that I couldn't say it, but it wasn't something to be discussed in that setting."

"What is it?"

"Olivia Lanze wants to make use of Eleion Bolton."

"Ah…"

"It's a shame to leave such a valuable person idle, isn't it? He's skilled and a veteran."

Eleion Bolton had handed over the position of Holy Knights' Commander to Rowan with a very simple transfer of authority. Therefore, when the Allied Forces began their march, Rowan would be in charge of commanding the Holy Knights

There was some noise surrounding the matter.

Naturally, the members of the Holy Knight Order in the allied forces couldn't help but know that Eleion Bolton's sudden retirement wasn't voluntary.

They couldn't help but realize that there was some political intrigue involved.

However, Eleion Bolton's closest associates had already been silenced.

Though they knew that the top brass of the Holy Knight Order had defected to the Demon King, they were well aware of the repercussions that would come from exposing that fact.

Everything couldn't go smoothly.

Eleion Bolton was a person who couldn't be left alone, and the inevitable noise had to be accepted in order to swallow the Holy Knight whole.

Thus, if Rowan failed to take control of the Holy Knight Order of the allied forces, Eleion Bolton might be reinserted into the mix. That would ultimately be both Rowan's and my failure.

Anyway, although Eleion Bolton had retired as the former Holy Knight Commander quite unexpectedly, he was spending his retirement in the territory of the Demon King.

That wasn't entirely without significance.

Eleion Bolton's closest associates knew the ins and outs of the incident, and that Eleion Bolton had come under my influence after his retirement. They didn't know about Edina Archipelago, however.

For that reason, those loyal to Eleion Bolton were essentially held hostage by their current master.

There was a reason why they couldn't act rashly.

Suddenly, Olivia Lanze wanted to use the retired Eleion Bolton.

"How? It's absurd to deploy him in the war, isn't it?"

"She'll figure it out. The important thing is that it seems she wants to make him agree with the banner of the United Holy Church."

"Ah… She wants to convert him?"

"That's right."

There's really no such thing as a Demon God.

In the end, there were only other names given to the Divine. Moreover, the powers they manifested were not consistent.

Olivia Lanze wanted to turn the former Holy Knight Commander into a member of the United Holy Church.

"To be honest, I'm not sure about that…"

I half-agree with the saying that a position makes a person.

To be precise, a position creates arrogance.

If I were captured by the empire and forced to participate in some affair, I couldn't help but feel miserable. Even more so if it were against my will.

Of course, Eleion Bolton had no say in the matter, but I didn't want to force such a

thing on a person of his stature and create resentment.

Even if Eleion Bolton developed some resentment, it wasn't a situation where he could do anything significant.

"Reinhardt, what would happen if Eleion Bolton were converted?"

"He'd become one of our priests or holy knights, I suppose…?"

The United Holy Church is not a cult of the Demon Gods.

It's just a new form of faith that agrees with the notion that both the cult of the Demon Gods and the Five Great Religions share the same roots. It's different from both the Five Great Religions and the cult of the Demon Gods, and it's closer to the essence.

Eleion Bolton would be converted to the United Holy Church, not the Five Great Religions.

What could that mean?

"His thoughts on the cult of the Demon Gods would change, and then what would happen?"

"He'd be able to use the divine power of the Demon Gods… Well, it depends on how he does it."

Priests of the Holy Order sometimes used opposing holy powers. Of course, not all of them could do this, but it was not so rare either.

Prominently, the Holy Knights of Tu'an wielded both healing and corrupting powers. Olivia Lanze was one such example.

"That's the important part."

"Do you want to empower Eleion Bolton? It might help, but as long as they have immortals, aren't the chances high that we won't participate in the war? And I'm not sure if he'll be on our side properly. It seems better to leave things as they are."

"…"

Charlotte widened her eyes.

“…Sorry, can you tell me which part was stupid and how?"

"I thought you just habitually said you don't fit in and can't do well in politics and governing, but… it seems to be true."

King's annoyance.

Everyone knew that I disliked that.

"If Eleion Bolton could use the holy power of the demon god, and if he truly becomes influenced by the United Holy Church, not only would there be backlash within the Holy Knights, but it could also cause huge waves within the main Holy Order, provided we show it publicly."

"Ah… so this was about politics."

I hadn't thought about that aspect since I had been focused only on the war.

The conversation was not about the individual strength of Eleion Bolton.

Not about strengthening Eleion Bolton with the demon god’s divine power, but the influence that the fact of his conversion itself could bring.

That was what they were talking about.

"Even if Rowan has taken control of the forces in the capital, it's inevitable that she'll struggle to control the Holy Knights of the allied forces. Depending on the situation, we may need to reinstate Eleion Bolton. However, it would be better if we could change Eleion Bolton's way of thinking a bit before doing so."

Reinstating Eleion Bolton assumed Rowan's failure.

But in that case, if Eleion Bolton had already been influenced by the Holy Order, he would take over the tasks Rowan should have done but failed.

In fact, many people at the allied forces' garrison were suspicious and resentful about the sudden change of the Holy Knights' commander.

Rowan was experiencing the same situation Eleion Bolton had faced in the empire.

Rowan was a parachuted commander who appeared under suspicious circumstances of a sudden replacement. There were bound to be difficulties, and those difficulties would grow.

Olivia Lanze had predicted such a future and was considering the idea of converting and reinstating Eleion Bolton as a commander while he was idle.

Rowan had control of the capital, and Eleion Bolton controlled the Holy Knights of the allied forces.

"Capturing Eleion Bolton completely and converting him would indeed be the best option…"

It made sense why Olivia thought that way and why Charlotte positively assessed Olivia's proposal.

"Hmm… it would have been better if this was done earlier."

Back then, we had a lot to do, like overhauling the structure of the Five Great Religions and keeping it hidden from the outside. But now, I thought it would have been better if we had done it much earlier.

"No, if we had done it hastily, it would have only caused resentment."

Charlotte shook her head.

"Rather, now is the perfect time."

Approximately two months.

It had been enough time for me to organize my thoughts and feel the change in my emotions.

Could Eleion Bolton be considered a prisoner of war?

The empire and us were at war, but it wasn't a war where we were pointing our

swords at each other.

Should I say that we were secretly forming an alliance against a common enemy?

When faced with my question of whether to die or retire, Eleion Bolton didn't insist on fighting to the death.

In a way, he was a general who had unknowingly entered enemy territory without realizing that it was, in fact, enemy territory and had been captured.

He hadn't defected, but he was in my hands.

While he couldn't exactly be considered a prisoner of war, Eleion Bolton's situation was virtually no different from being one.

In fact, considering the position he held, he could be said to be a prisoner of a higher status than a king.

So, even if Eleion Bolton didn't have any authority at the moment, it would be appropriate to treat him with the respect due to his status.

Furthermore, we were going to try to persuade him.

That's why Charlotte, the regent of Edina, and I, the actual ruler of Edina, decided to meet with Eleion Bolton together.

"But, you know, I'm not sure if this is right."

“…Right?"

"Even though we're both nobles… Even if Liana says it's fine…”

"Living there?"

"Yeah."

Eleion Bolton was neither a noble nor a royal, but he had held the very special position of Holy Knights' Commander.

It had been difficult for us to find a place suitable for such a prominent figure to

retire and receive proper treatment.

Initially, Lazak, the royal capital, was not large enough to be called a capital. It was inevitable for a small country's capital, but to Charlotte, who had been a princess, it must have felt like a shabby provincial lord's castle.

We had forced Eleion Bolton to retire, but we didn't want to treat him poorly. However, we didn't have a suitable place to treat him.

Charlotte and I were walking along a quiet path on the outskirts of Lazak.

"Lady Yelena said it's fine, and Bolton himself said it's okay. What's the problem? Liana doesn't seem to have any issues with it, so it doesn't seem dangerous."

“…Is that so?"

So Eleion Bolton had ended up staying at the mansion of Yelena, Liana's mother, on the outskirts of Lazak like a guest.

That place.

The vacation house of the Grantz family, where we had stopped by after returning from Darkland during our first-year summer vacation.

When we were worrying about what to do with Eleion Bolton's lodging during the council of elders meeting, Liana casually suggested that he could stay there.

One of the countless ducal vacation houses built during the heyday of the Grantz Ducal family, we couldn't have provided a better environment for him.

In fact, both Eleion Bolton and Duchess Yelena seemed to get along well without any issues.

But…

Somehow…

It felt odd!

I couldn't exactly say what was wrong!

I knew it wasn't strange at all!

I might be a little conservative, but still!

It felt a bit off!

"What are you thinking about all the time?"

"…"

Charlotte looked at me with a disgusted expression and then walked ahead with large strides.

Right?

Was I the strange one?

Strictly speaking, the residence of the Duchess of Grantz, Liana's mother, was a more luxurious building than the Lazak Royal Palace.

The Grantz Duchy had held a power incomparable to that of the southern archipelago's minor kingdom, the Edina Royal Family. In a way, it was only natural.

There was bound to be a difference between the imperial nobility and the royal families, even among the top tier.

Not all royals were necessarily above the nobility. Some were both nobility and royalty at the same time.

Harriet, the daughter of the Archduke of Saint Owan, was a noblewoman but in fact not much different from royalty.

Now the Grantz Ducal Mansion, which should be called the main residence rather than a villa.

As we approached the mansion overlooking the beach after passing through a secluded path, someone's back came into view.

A familiar figure.

“…What brings you here?"

Upon hearing footsteps, Liana turned towards me and asked.

She then glanced at Charlotte, who had come with me.

"Considering you brought the regent, it's not a personal matter."

"Well, that's true."

There was no particular reason to come here for personal matters.

I rarely visited this place; I usually called her when there was work to be done.

"We came to see Sir Bolton."

"Ah, that gentleman."

The once prestigious and powerful Holy Knight Commander had now become a guest gentleman.

Well, Liana would probably have called Bolton "that gentleman" even when he was the active Holy Knight Commander.

Liana gestured towards the beach.

"He's taking a walk."

"A walk?"

"He went with my mother. They should be back soon?"

Hmm.

“…Ouch!"

As I was about to say something, Charlotte pinched my side.

“…What are you doing?"

Liana tilted her head, looking at Charlotte who suddenly pinched my side.

"Huh? Oh, it's nothing."

Charlotte shrugged her shoulders with an awkward smile.

CHAPTER 622

Although the allied forces were about to set out, we were no longer necessary to them. Hence, most people were on standby, but Liana had a special mission.

Absolute stability.

Exactly as it sounds.

Liana, who had gained the attribute of bringing rain when she cried, had to take a special drug to control the weather. It was similar to a depression inducer.

Thus, Liana had to exhaust her mental energy, not her magical or physical strength, to unleash her powerful ability.

What was usually demanded of Liana was to maintain her composure. She constantly took depression inducers, so that she would not lose her ability to use her power when it was truly needed.

So Liana usually spent her time at the mansion as if she was recovering.

The last time she had used her ability was to melt the heavy snowfall that had fallen in the Imperial Capital.

We drank tea until Eleion Bolton and the Duchess returned.

Although not as much as before, this villa still had servants. It was one of the few places where one could live like a noble in Edina.

"Are you going to convert him completely?"

"If we can."

"Hmm… Do we really need to go that far? He doesn't seem like he would cause any trouble."

That's right.

Unlike Harriet, who was teased as a blockhead just by words, Liana was more of a true blockhead.

And like I couldn't understand the meaning of converting Eleion Bolton, nor the intentions of Charlotte and Olivia, Liana couldn't understand it either.

Moreover, she even perceived the attempt to convert Eleion Bolton as a form of mental reconditioning, since she didn't know if he would cause trouble.

"Would we teach an old retired man's mind just because we have nothing else to do?"

"You don't have anything else to do, though."

"That, that's true…"

Although a blockhead, she still didn't get along well with me!

"Depending on the situation, we may need to recall Bolton. We're just preparing for that."

Instead of me, Charlotte spoke up.

"Recall…?"

"Sending him back to his position."

"…Do you think I asked because I didn't know the term 'recall'?"

"Could it be that you actually know it?"

At my words, Liana slightly opened her mouth.

This…

"What do you really think of me? Seriously?"

It seemed like she had tried to act knowledgeable, but ended up losing face.

Why do you know that?

What are you anyway?

"You’re just a lucky girl who got comfortable abilities for both your head and body."

"…"

"…"

Did I go too far?

Sparks began to fly from Liana's furrowed brow.

-Sizzle! Sizzle!

"Do you really want to fight?"

"Want to try?"

"Stop it! Why are you acting like children?"

Charlotte sighed, looking at Liana and me taking turns with disdain as we bickered during a serious conversation.

Liana tilted her head, looking at Charlotte.

"But, technically, we're still children."

That's true.

But I'm not a child.

I'm definitely not a child.

"…"

"Why the sour face?"

"No… I was wrong."

At my apology, both Charlotte and Liana looked puzzled.

Trying to win against a child at this age and scratching at them. I couldn't believe how pathetic I was!

"Why haven't you fixed the habit of saying unnecessary things?"

"That's true."

That's right? Why can't I grow up?

Is it too late?

"Reinstating that old man? What are you talking about?"

"It's not yet decided. Although the Imperial Capital's power has been seized, there may be some resistance from the Holy Knight division of the Allied Forces command. Our goal is to convert the entire Holy Knights into the United Holy Order. If Eleion Bolton, who will act as the leader, can use the divine power of Demon God, the process will become easier."

"Ah… So that's what it is."

Only then did Liana seem to understand, slowly nodding her head.

Even if the popes had been alive, Eleion Bolton would have had no choice but to cooperate with me. However, by choosing Rowan, I now had the option to convert the entire Five Great Religions into the United Holy Church. Even if I reinstated him now, he wouldn't dare oppose me, as it would bring about a greater crisis. But it was even better if we agreed to the United Holy Church's banner after Rowan had failed, if she failed at all.

Charlotte took a sip of her tea.

Her appearance had changed a lot from the past, but her elegance was still felt even in the way she drank tea.

Watching Charlotte made me realize that elegance was a very subtle thing.

It seemed similar to grace, yet it was entirely different. It wasn't ostentatious but subtly revealed. If one tried to imitate elegance and overdid it, it would look ridiculous.

The person just acted as usual without any thought, and it felt elegant. The essence of elegance. That was probably what it was.

If you look closely, something would make your heart flutter.

Anyway, there was something like that, right?

"Hm? Guests have arrived."

We hadn't been talking for long when the duchess and Eleion Bolton returned to the mansion.

Duchess Yelena de Grantz.

And former Holy Knight Commander Eleion Bolton.

"Hello, Duchess. It's been a while since I've visited."

"It has been quite some time since I last saw Your Highness, the Princess. The Demon King was also very polite."

"Ah, yes…"

Charlotte stood up and greeted her properly, while I awkwardly rose and scratched the back of my head.

Elegance.

I didn't know exactly what it was, but I was sure I wouldn't have it until the day I died.

"Did you come to see me?"

As soon as he saw us, Eleion Bolton seemed to know the reason and looked at Charlotte and me with a stern expression.

Yes, it was time to get to the main point. Charlotte looked at me.

"Reinhardt?"

"Yeah."

As I looked at her with a determined expression, Charlotte smiled brightly and pointed outside.

"You should go out."

“…Huh?"

"It's better if you're not here."

"But I can also fight while being invisible… When needed, I can hide…!"

Liana is my friend!

I wouldn't say that to Eleion Bolton!

At my protest, Charlotte's expression turned cold.

"Leave."

"Yes…”

In the end, I was kicked out.

As it was a crucial moment for the discussion, Charlotte and Eleion Bolton were left behind, while Liana and the duchess tactfully left the mansion.

And I was kicked out.

Liana laughed at me.

"Does it feel good? Why did you say something unnecessary and reduce the little trust you had?"

"Shouldn't I see it as trusting Charlotte enough to leave such an important position to her?"

Wasn't it?

"I know it didn't look that way at all."

Yeah, I knew it wasn't the case.

Negotiation, politics. I neither knew well nor had any taste for them.

I was only grateful that Charlotte took care of such matters and thought more diligently about them than I did.

Huh?

But then, why did I come here?

Wasn't it enough to leave it to Charlotte?

Ah, if I hadn't wasted time arguing with Liana, I would have been sitting there.

Being scolded by a subject and kicked out as a king, something felt strange about it.

Of course, I did hope for this. Rather than an overly hierarchical relationship, I hoped for one where we could treat each other more comfortably.

Leave.

That was a bit too much…

I'll definitely tell her later how hurt I was…

It's not just a saying; I'll really tell her…

Anyway, in the end, I had nothing to do until Charlotte finished talking, so I strolled along the beach.

I, the duchess, and Liana.

I didn't know about Liana, but I didn't see the duchess very often.

"The Allied Forces will begin advancing again, right?"

"Yes? Ah… Yes. They seem to be leaving in a few days."

The duchess must have heard from Liana, so she knew to some extent how the world was turning and asked me about it.

After becoming a king from a friend of her daughter, and after coming to this place, the duchess treated me disdainfully.

Honestly, she wasn't very pleasant at first sight.

Of course, she openly showed her disapproval of her daughter mingling with low-born people, and even went so far as to invite only Harriet to breakfast.

She was extremely sensitive about status and was a very worldly person.

It was clear that she had a very bad relationship with the now deceased Duke of Grantz.

However, in the end, the Duchess of Grantz seemed to have undergone a significant change of heart after the death of the duke.

She reconciled with her daughter and even informed her that the real culprit who killed the Duke of Grantz was not the Demon King, urging her to take revenge on her father.

People change.

A worldly person cannot be worldly all their life.

A person who was pure can become worldly.

A wicked person can become good.

A good person can become wicked.

People change.

Whether the change is big or small, people cannot help but change as they live.

The Duchess of Grantz changed, I changed, Liana changed.

And Charlotte and Eleion Bolton changed as well.

We would continue to change and change again.

"Will you also go to the battlefield like last time?"

"I think we need to watch the situation for now, but I'm not sure what will happen. If the situation isn't bad, we may not need to fight ourselves. I can't say for sure."

"I see…"

At my words, the duchess sighed.

It was a sigh of relief.

Only then did I realize something I had completely overlooked, buried in my thoughts.

The duchess was sending her daughter to the battlefield. A place of death and terror where horrendous monsters roamed. No matter how strong a supernatural her daughter was, no parent would be happy about it.

Moreover, her daughter's mental state deteriorated as she used her abilities. Regardless of whether she survived the war or not, she must have known the suffering.

From the duchess's point of view, I was the one who kept taking her daughter to the battlefield.

Therefore, I must have been an unwelcome person.

I hadn't seen it often, but the mere fact that the duchess hadn't shown any signs of her feelings to me was enough to know she was good at hiding her emotions.

A person who constantly sends their child to the battlefield…

What would I have done in her shoes?

If I had a child and their friend kept taking my son or daughter to the battlefield, claiming their abilities were necessary.

They had returned safely so far, but there was no telling how long that would last.

It was fortunate that they hadn't been caught yet.

Liana was too valuable a person.

A parent's worry, sorrow, and fear had to be ignored.

"May I ask why you spared Sir Bolton?"

I couldn't help but be taken aback by her sudden question.

I thought they were on good terms since they took walks together, but was that not the case at all? Liana's expression hardened at the duchess's unexpected words.

"Did Sir Eleion Bolton cause any trouble?"

I hadn't thought he was the type to cause mischief, but if he had secretly stirred up trouble, I couldn't just let it go.

"Not at all."

I didn't sense any anger or similar emotions towards Eleion Bolton from the duchess's expression.

"He may not be the best conversationalist, but he is an honorable man with high principles, understanding, and consideration."

While I couldn't say she was fond of him, her words conveyed that she respected Eleion Bolton enough.

Then why ask the reason I had left him live?

"It's not Sir Bolton's importance that I'm curious about, but rather the reason you spared him."

Was it a question unrelated to Eleion Bolton's attitude or actions?

It was a question aimed at me from the start, not Eleion Bolton.

“…I didn't think it was necessary to do that."

By not killing him, as I did now, I might have discovered a new use for Eleion Bolton.

The duchess looked at me with a stern expression in response to my words.

"Necessary… necessary… you say."

With that, she murmured to herself and walked silently.

The atmosphere had become tense.

"When all this is over, what do you plan to do with the empire?"

"The empire… you ask?"

"Yes."

At the duchess's words, I felt a lump in my throat.

Bertus had killed Duke Grantz.

Liana wanted revenge, and the duchess likely felt the same.

Bertus was a royal of the empire.

As such, he was not only responsible for keeping the greatest threat to the empire, the Demon King, in check, but also for eliminating revolutionary forces that could shake the empire's foundation.

That was Bertus's duty and something he had to protect.

Bertus had to kill Duke Grantz.

However, the duchess had lost her husband, and Liana had lost her father.

It was only natural for them to hate the empire and Bertus.

These natural occurrences.

What must I do, and who am I to do it?

Especially if it leads to someone's natural desire for revenge.

Where did the problem begin, and who is truly at fault?

If everyone does what they believe they should, and all that builds up is hatred, anger, and a desire for revenge, is there something fundamentally wrong with the world?

"If I say I won't destroy the empire, will you hate me?"

"Can you hate me more than you do now?"

She was blunt, this woman.

"Mother, please."

"I have many things to be grateful for from the Demon King, but you must understand that I cannot help but feel this way."

“…I suppose there's nothing to be done."

"You don't need to understand my dislike of you."

“…Excuse me?"

"Why should you understand why I dislike you?"

Her unexpected comment left me somewhat dazed.

"In this chaotic world where even your own survival is difficult, why are you trying so hard to understand so much?"

"…”

"Why should someone who bears the burden of an entire nation and countless lives prioritize understanding others?"

"…”

"You should hate those who hate you."

The Duchess looked at me as she spoke.

Her words were not advice or criticism, but rather a scolding tone.

"You must kill those who try to kill you."

"…"

"Is that all?"

I had nothing to say in response.

"Sometimes, you have to kill those who don't want to kill you. You have to hate those who don't hate you, and there will be times when you must take the lives of those who don't resent you."

"…"

"Even those who have loved you all their lives, and who have never thought of betraying you, must be killed if necessary. That is the life of an emperor. Watching coldly as someone dies in tears and wails, with their face stained with a sense of betrayal, is the life of an emperor."

"…"

"Do you think there has ever been an emperor in history who ruled with mercy, warmth, and understanding?"

“…There probably hasn't."

"No country has ever been built without taking something from others. Those who are not accustomed to taking cannot maintain or possess anything."

"…"

"So why are you trying to be an emperor as a human?"

With love, understanding, and mercy.

There couldn't have been a history of uniting the world through such things.

To build a mountain, one must take and take again.

A tower of gold built from the stolen items, and atop the highest peak sits the throne of the greatest thief in the world.

That is a nation.

A hat made of stolen gold leaf is placed on the head, called a crown, and the one who wears it becomes the king.

Steal a little and you're a thief, steal a lot and you're a great thief who goes down in history.

Steal everything in the world, and no one will call you a thief.

The beginning of all this was my plundering of Edina's throne.

I, too, started by taking.

"Those who only topple those who deserve hatred, those who deserve to be hated, may become avengers or righteous bandits, but they cannot sit on the throne of dominion, and they must not."

Yes.

It's not about toppling those who deserve hatred.

It's about turning the fallen into those who deserve hatred.

That's what it means to be an emperor.

That's what history is about.

At times, I must kill even those who love me and calmly look into their eyes, filled with betrayal in their dying moments.

Trying to be a king as a human is arrogant.

The Duchess was pointing out my arrogance.

Are you so great that you can be a king as a human?

Can you protect everyone while acting so carelessly?

You, who only uses my daughter, can you really protect her?

She was scolding me.

"He may have gained neighbors through this approach, but weren't neighbors the most terrifying beings in the world?"

Neighbors could always become our allies.

But it was always the neighbors who took something away from us.

Neighbors were equal beings.

Thus, a king didn't need neighbors.

For a king, all beings in the world should be beneath him.

As Bertus had once said,

All were equal beneath me, in that kind of arrogance.

A different kind of arrogance was necessary.

That attitude had to be present.

Duchess Grantz looked at me.

"I dislike the un-cruel you."

Her dislike of me wasn't solely due to bringing her daughter into war.

My approach of sparing the enemy commander, allowing him to live peacefully like this.

Though sparing Eleion Bolton might have its uses, she pointed out that I hadn't spared him for his usefulness alone.

She didn't dislike Eleion Bolton.

She seemed to consider my approach of sparing him dangerous.

A king who takes his daughter to war would be unwelcome.

But a king who has no intention of truly killing his enemies, who lets his kingdom be swayed by acceptance and wholeness, would be even more unwelcome if her daughter had to live in that land.

Wars would eventually end, but a king who was indecisive and compassionate would permanently endanger the kingdom.

"A king must kill even the harmless. Sometimes, he must even devour the dog he raised."

This approach of not killing someone unless they reveal their teeth.

Not killing someone who doesn't show me their teeth.

Only trying to kill the despicable ones.

It seemed she didn't like my approach of only trying to kill those who were definitively my enemies.

Duchess Grantz spoke to me as if scolding a child.

"Do you intend to convince the sheep inside the fence that the hunger of the wolves and foxes outside is inevitable? Even when you don't know whether they're wolves in dog's skin, do you plan to let them in simply because they haven't shown their teeth to me?"

I had no answer to the Duchess's words.

Eleion Bolton was not a wolf.

The Duchess knew that.

But she was scolding me for bringing someone into the fence without knowing whether they were a dog or a wolf, thinking there was no need to kill them.

Someday, I would bring a wolf in dog's skin into the fence.

That's what she was saying.

"That is the most dangerous tyranny."

A king who dispenses death lightly is a tyrant.

A king who values death too highly is a dark lord.

"Your Majesty."

The Duchess knelt before me.

And desperately,

She implored.

"Please become a cruel sovereign."

A king and a saint were different.

If you tried to be a king with the ways of a saint, you could neither have nor protect anything.

Duchess Grantz begged.

CHAPTER 623

On the way to persuade Eleion Bolton, I found myself not speaking with Eleion Bolton at all, but instead listening to the soft yet firm rebuke of the duchess.

Foolish pride does not make one a tyrant or a despot.

No, there were simply too many foolish things a person seated on the throne could do.

There could be a tyrant who killed people without proper principles or one who waged endless wars of conquest without justifiable reasons.

However, paying too much attention to the circumstances of outsiders and refusing to kill enemies who hadn't bared their teeth against me could also be tyrannical in its own right.

The duchess pointed out that the scope of my definition of who needed to be killed was far too narrow.

It could be a threat.

In this dangerous age, when merely the possibility of a threat was enough to warrant annihilating someone, I had been criticized for prioritizing not killing those whose allegiance was unclear.

Wasn't it enough to just kill the enemy?

Was that too human a way of thinking?

Once an enemy was confirmed, the foe would have already bared their teeth, and battle would be inevitable.

There was also a way of killing before they became an enemy.

I was no born king.

But how long could I use that as an excuse? Now that I was already a king, it could not be justified or excused that I lacked the qualities necessary to be one.

I had nothing to say to the duchess who felt uneasy and thought my way was dangerous.

I agreed with her.

While it would take all my strength to protect the sheep within the fence, I had been living my life thinking that the pack of beasts roaming outside the fence might also be sheep.

A king should protect the inside of the fence and consider everything outside the fence as the enemy.

I had not been doing that.

If the land where I and my children lived was ruled by a monarch with such a disposition, I would dislike that country too.

It wasn't about killing Eleion Bolton.

She had asked if I intended to continue this way and if I knew how dangerous it was.

No one had built a nation on love, understanding, and mercy.

A throne could only be built upon what had been taken.

And that throne had to be maintained with blood.

If asked whether I knew this truth, I couldn't say I didn't.

It was just hard to accept.

The duchess hadn't told me something only she knew.

She had told me something everyone around me knew but didn't dare tell me.

It could be because they were sorry, or because they knew I would struggle with it, or because they didn't want to burden me further.

The duchess had told me something everyone knew but no one said to me.

That, too, was ultimately an act of courage.

Our walk was neither long nor short.

We just walked silently in the heavy atmosphere.

Upon returning to the mansion, Eleion Bolton and Charlotte were already outside.

Had their conversation ended?

"Reinhardt, Sir Bolton would like to speak with you for a moment."

“…Really?"

I wasn't sure how the conversation had unfolded.

However, judging by Charlotte's expression, it didn't seem to have had too terrible an outcome.

I had a private conversation with Eleion Bolton.

Not inside the mansion, but outside. The footprints on the beach where we had just walked remained undisturbed.

I wasn't sure what they had discussed, but my heart felt even heavier.

"I don't think I've ever had a choice."

“…Really?"

Originally, in the novel, the leader of the Holy Knights was Riverrier Lanze. And it hadn't changed.

Olivia Lanze had exited the story in the margins.

Eleion Bolton was also one of the marginal characters.

I didn't know Riverrier Lanze's personal affairs, let alone Eleion Bolton's.

I only knew about his public affairs.

Eleion Bolton became the next leader of the Holy Knights due to the downfall of the radical Riverrier Lanze.

It probably wasn't his will. The empire wanted Eleion Bolton to be the leader of the Holy Knights. And whether the popes had received their influence or not, they must have wanted to keep Riverrier Lanze, one of the main protagonists in the Demon War and a war hero, in check. They wouldn't have wanted the influence of the leader of the Holy Knights to grow too much.

Eleion Bolton became the leader of the Holy Knights due to various circumstances. Whether he wanted to be the leader of the Holy Knights or not was irrelevant.

Even in the situation just before the Gate incident, he had been swayed by the opinions of the pope, Ellen, and Olivia.

And as time passed, the popes chose to turn the Order into the Demon King’s clutches on their own accord.

Just a few days later, he was forced to step down.

And now, he had been offered to become a Holy Knight of the United Holy Order due to the possibility of returning to his position as the leader of the Holy Knights.

Looking at it this way, he was a person who had been pushed around to an almost cruel extent.

Despite having considerable authority, strength, and power, he was a person who showed that one could still be swayed by greater powers and wills.

"And now, even the gods I've believed in so far have all been lies."

That's right.

From the beginning, the teachings about the five gods and the demon gods were all in vain.

There was no truth anywhere, and even faith had been arbitrarily reinterpreted.

"Moreover, Tiamata has two forms."

“…Yes."

"Can you show me?"

Perhaps just hearing about it wasn't enough.

Or maybe he needed to see with his own eyes that the power of the gods was truly arbitrary, as the United Holy Order said.

I didn't know which one it was, but I summoned Tiamata to my right hand.

The pure white sword spirit of purity, Tiamata.

But this wasn't what he wanted.

-Kurung!

I didn't even need a command anymore.

Tiamata's sword spirit, reacting to my will, began to darken and ooze darkness.

“…The aura of corruption."

Eleion Bolton stared at the demonic Tiamata in silence.

"Is that enough?"

"That's enough."

As I dismissed the demonic Tiamata, Eleion Bolton gave a bitter smile.

"Are the gods malicious, or have we misunderstood them all this time?"

Even here, gods were considered beings beyond human understanding.

However, they lent their power even when misunderstood.

They lent their power because they thought they were properly believed in, but in fact, they lent their power even when they were misunderstood.

What were the gods?

Eleion Bolton seemed to be lost in such a fundamental question.

"I don't suppose the United Holy Order has a complete understanding of the gods either."

The Demon Gods and the Great Gods were the same beings.

It was even questionable whether the five Great Gods were truly the five Great Gods.

"Although I can't reveal the source, I'll share an interesting fact."

"Is there anything more surprising for me here?"

"Vampires were originally derived from the Sun God and the Moon God."

The truth that Luna Artorious had shared.

Vampires were actually born of the gods.

Those who sought immortality prayed to the Moon, and they received the Moon's blessing while simultaneously being cursed by the Sun.

That was the beginning of vampires, or so he had heard.

After longing for forgiveness from the gods for a long time, they were finally granted it.

But in exchange, they became beings forever separated from the world.

"It doesn't sound like a joke."

Eleion Bolton laughed bitterly, as if realizing that something that didn't even qualify as a cheap joke was actually the truth.

"Actually, saying I never had a choice is a lie."

"…?"

"I just didn't have an opinion."

If that's what he meant, then perhaps that was the case.

"If I didn't want to be the commander of the Holy Knights, I could have refused. But I didn't do that."

"If I had decided to kill or save the Demon King, I could have done so. But I didn't make any choices."

"If I wanted to object to the Pope's decision to support you, I could have said so. I didn't do that either."

"When you requested retirement and I didn't like it, I could have drawn my sword. But I didn't do that either."

"I just went along with the tide. Always."

"Looking back, there's no life more cowardly than this."

It wasn't that he didn't have a choice.

He simply didn't choose the less likely options, always going with the flow.

He had power and authority but always lived a middle-of-the-road life, following the flow. It wasn't about what was right or wrong.

Who were the majority?

Where was the trend?

He followed that flow.

Neither an absolute supporter nor an absolute opponent.

Was it a life swept away or a life freeloading?

Eleion Bolton seemed to think that his previous statement about not having a choice

was just a pathetic excuse.

"So now, will you try making a choice with your own will?"

"There's no reason to. The tide hasn't changed."

There was no resistance.

"Isn't it better to live as a coward to the end if one has been a coward once? At least, I'll be able to maintain the principle of consistency."

A life without faith or pride.

He might have thought he had such things once, but Eleion Bolton had long since admitted that he was too pathetic to speak of them now.

So, if he lived as a coward forever, he would at least maintain that one consistency.

Not the consistency of being good for a lifetime, but the consistency of being a coward for a lifetime.

Now, rather than making choices and finding his own direction, Eleion Bolton's attitude of choosing to be a coward for life seemed utterly despairing.

"Considering that the rare choice to kill my subordinate turned out to be the worst choice, it seems like I'm not the type of person who should make choices. Or perhaps, this too is just an excuse."

Eleion Bolton laughed.

He laughed for a long time.

As always.

Bitterness was bound to mix with an old man's self-mockery.

Upon reflecting on his life, he realized that all that remained was his cowardice.

The sorrow mixed with his self-mockery felt unbearably sad.

Eleion Bolton and I talked briefly afterward.

"For several months, I've traveled around this country."

"It must have been quite a bizarre sight for you."

The coexistence of humans and demons sometimes felt grotesque to me as well.

"Yes, it was."

This place was sparsely populated, but it seemed he had wandered around Lazak while staying here.

He must have been with the duchess.

Whether the duchess had offered to guide him first or Eleion Bolton had asked her first was unknown.

"All I could think was how strange this land is."

"It certainly is strange."

He must have had many thoughts while observing the landscapes created in Edina Archipelago.

"Ogres tilling the fields, trolls constructing buildings, orcs standing guard, succubi comforting orphaned children as they slept together, and mermaids appearing on the beach, exchanging jokes with humans…"

"A strange land."

"Was this even possible?"

"If this was possible, why have we been living the way we have until now?"

"Why did we…"

"Fear each other, hate each other."

"Kill and be killed?"

"Why were we so adamant that there were no other options?"

"Where did such claims originate, and how did everyone come to believe them?"

"I've become curious."

Eleion Bolton looked up at the blue sky that signaled the arrival of spring.

"Demo… No. Reinhardt."

"Yes?"

"In a way, this country is a disaster."

A disaster.

I still thought it was much better than the Empire.

But I didn't misunderstand the meaning of his words.

"Do you know how many people will despair just because they've learned that the long history of hatred between us was actually meaningless, and that this could have been possible?"

"I suppose it could be seen that way."

All the wars up to this point were meaningless.

The history of hatred and animosity, what we believed was right, was denied by what we saw before us.

We could coexist and cooperate.

The Great Demon War was not a glorious war.

For many people, the result that overturned human values and historical views could bring despair rather than hope.

"Did you despair?"

"Yes."

More than anything, the one who despaired amidst the peaceful and bizarre scenes was Eleion Bolton himself.

The beings he killed, the beings who died.

None of them had to suffer that fate. He must have felt it.

"If I had known that this was possible… No, if the world had been like this from the beginning, the Gate Incident would never have happened."

The current reality is the result of mutual distrust.

If we had a society of coexistence and cooperation, there would have been no hatred, distrust, or fear of the Demon King in the first place, and the Great Demon War, the cause of all this, wouldn't have happened.

And then, humans invaded the demon race.

Lack of faith and trust caused all the problems.

In fact, that was the root of everything in the world.

It was ridiculous.

The duchess had told me to hate everyone beyond the fence.

Eleion Bolton realized that all the blood and tears shed until now had been meaningless.

Those who do not know war speak of slaughter, while those who know war speak of peace.

They speak of the futility of slaughter.

"It's not like humans were the only ones who feared demons."

Demons felt the same way.

For a very long time, demons had also been afraid of humans.

Eleris, an ancient Archdemon, had once dreamed of the extinction of humanity.

The previous Demon King, Valier, had also been afraid of humans. That was why he had wanted to create a world without them.

Both sides feared each other equally.

"I hate this country."

Eleion Bolton said this with a stern expression.

The moment he realized that peace had been possible, he understood that he could not justify any of the past events. He had not triumphed over humanity's ultimate enemy, but merely succumbed to fear and committed massacres.

Facing the despairing truth, Eleion Bolton could not help but hate this peaceful scene.

"However, it's a scene that must be protected because it's detestable."

In the end, this scene showed a possibility that had been deemed impossible.

Although feeling despair was inevitable, it was not a sight that should disappear.

The truth did not disappear just because it was denied.

The truth could not be erased from one's mind just because it was unpleasant to know.

The truth that had been imprinted in his mind could not be erased.

It seemed as though he believed he had no choice but to protect this truth.

After talking with Eleion Bolton, Charlotte and I headed back to Lazak.

"What did you talk about with him? We agreed to cooperate."

It seemed that Eleion Bolton had already decided to cooperate when he talked to Charlotte.

It must have been difficult for him to accept his life of cowardice, and to commit to living a cowardly life forever.

"Nothing much, really."

I didn't know if Eleion Bolton had talked about his cowardice with Charlotte, but I hesitated to discuss his personal matters further.

"He called it a strange country."

Eleion Bolton was shocked.

A strange country.

Well, it was a scene that would have been shocking to the demon hunters.

"Indeed, it is a strange country."

Charlotte chuckled in agreement. Actually, I had come from a world that was essentially no different from humans and had no such thing as demons.

The strangest thing to me was this scene.

Like most wars, the Great Demon War was no different.

There was no one who deserved to die.

"You got what you wanted, but you don't look very happy."

"No, I am. I'm happy."

"Then smile a little."

At Charlotte's words, I awkwardly smiled.

Thoughts kept swirling in my head.

The Duchess's words that in order to protect peace, one must not hesitate to kill.

Eleion Bolton's words of despair upon realizing the meaninglessness of the war he had thought was justifiable.

The Duchess's words were not wrong.

However, if I were to live by her words, I would become Eleion Bolton.

We must fear our neighbors.

Knowing that the end of this fear was the present, we were forced to repeat the same history.

CHAPTER 624

Somewhere on the continent, a city had turned to ruins.

On a street in the desolate city that had become a no man's land, a few figures wearing robes gathered.

"The Immortal has already finished deploying the frontlines. The Allied Forces will move again, and we'll all head to the frontlines as well."

Christina, wearing a robe, spoke to the others who, like her, were dressed in black robes.

"Is the reverse summoning device functioning properly?"

"We've already confirmed its functionality in several preliminary tests. Even with a high failure rate, it won't be a major issue."

"Excellent."

The people in black robes nodded their heads in agreement with Christina.

"We didn't have much time, but you've done well so far."

At the compliment-like remark from the black-robed figures, Christina nodded her head.

"What's next?"

"The next step…"

The black-robed figures fell silent at Christina's question.

"It's absurd to discuss this before the Gate incident has ended, but isn't it time to talk about it?"

The black-robed figures remained silent at Christina's question.

What should be done after the Gate incident?

One of the black-robed figures spoke up.

"The Empire has reached its end."

The Empire, which committed numerous atrocities for survival, had lost its justification and legitimacy.

Although it was being maintained due to its current cause, once the Gate incident was resolved, people would demand accountability from the Empire.

"To survive, the Empire must find its next cause."

"The Demon King?"

"Yes."

If the Empire was being maintained by the absolute cause of the Gate incident, it would need to find the next cause after that cause had disappeared.

The cause of killing the Demon King, the root of all evil.

"That was the cause the Empire used to unify all of humanity. It wouldn't be impossible to reuse it."

Long ago, the Empire had been able to unify all of humanity because of the existence of the Darklands and the Demon King.

There was no cause greater than this: with the Demon King still alive, why should we fight among ourselves? This cause had prevented attempts at division and the rise of discordant forces.

The establishment and maintenance of the Empire had been possible because of the Demon King's existence.

So once the Gate incident had ended, all they had to do was return to the cause of the past.

"But the owner of the Empire doesn't have to be the Gardias royal family. We can

erase the past mistakes of the Empire along with the Gardias royal family and give birth to a new Empire."

The Empire must exist for the unification of humanity, but its ruler could change.

At the words of the black-robed figure, Christina silently looked at him.

"If the Demon King is used as the cause to maintain the Empire, I assume the Demon King is not among the candidates for the next ruler?"

The story was about uniting humanity against an enemy, and that enemy was the Demon King.

So the black-robed figure had not considered the possibility of the Demon King becoming the ruler of the next Empire at all.

"Of course. The majority of people would find it unacceptable to be ruled by the Demon King. The chaos that would ensue would be incomparable to what's happening with the current Empire."

"Hmm… Right. The problem isn't so much what the Demon King has actually done wrong, but how people perceive him…"

Christina slowly nodded her head, wearing a meaningful smile.

"So, who should be the next ruler of the empire? Surely not you guys?"

"…Of course not. Our principle is to not step forward."

Despite their dwindling numbers, the individuals in black robes seemed resolute, as if they had no intention of abandoning their principle.

"Yeah, I'm curious about that. Although your Order is now in decline, your knowledge and magic remain intact. That's why you were able to create the Immortal. So, why do you need to only work from behind the scenes?"

"Because there are tasks that can only be done from behind, and we are a group created to handle those tasks."

The principle of working for the sake of humanity.

The Black Order would even betray humanity if it was for that principle.

The moment they stepped forward, the meaning of the group would fade. Therefore, they worked on tasks that only they could perform from the shadows of history.

"There are many who could potentially become the next ruler of the empire. First, they must be somewhat distant from the empire, have made significant contributions in resolving the Gate incident, and be a person with a proper disposition as a leader of humanity."

"Louise von Schwarz of Kernstadt might be a possibility. Simultaneously being the second most powerful force after the empire and possessing a character and disposition that isn't too extreme or overly compromising, she has the proper qualities of a leader. Her contributions are also impeccable. However, it's almost certain that she killed her own siblings with her own hands, which could become a weakness someday."

"Archduke Raphael de Saint-Owan cannot be ruled out either. His contributions alone, in creating the Titan, are incomparable to anyone else. Furthermore, he has been faithful to the longstanding principle of the Saint-Owan family, which is to walk the path of righteousness. Although it is the opposite of our position, which allows us to use even the power of the apostles if it helps, the attitude of the Saint-Owan family and the current Archduke deserve people's respect and admiration. However, in this case, his daughter is too great a risk. Despite his contributions, he hasn't received proper recognition from the people."

"There are a few other candidates, but ultimately they lack power, contributions, or the capacity to embrace other major forces."

"Therefore."

"In the end."

"Ellen Artorius."

"She's the right choice."

"Her power, symbolism, and the support of the people all point to her."

"If she can lay the cornerstone of the next empire, it would be the best outcome."

The enormous weight of the title "Hero."

At a time when the empire has lost its legitimacy, and the enemy that should be exterminated is apparent.

The hero becomes a more significant name and symbol than any noble or king.

After the resolution of the Gate incident, for the unity and prosperity of humanity and a united will, the old empire must fall, and a new one must emerge.

Ellen Artorius becoming the ruler of the new empire.

The Black Order's judgment was that it was the best conclusion in the current situation.

Christina silently listened to the story.

The one who broke the silence was a man who had been leaning against the wall on the edge of the assembly hall, silent all this time.

"In the end… is it coercion again?"

At the sudden remark, the gazes of those in black robes turned in that direction.

"You intend to tell Ellen, who is struggling just to bear the title of Hero, that she must now become an emperor."

His unkempt black hair hung raggedly down to his neck, and a bandage was wrapped around his exposed arm beneath the cloak.

"What I'm curious about is…"

Between the tangled strands of hair, his deep, abyss-like eyes stared at those in robes.

"What qualifications do you guys have to make such decisions?"

At his words, silence enveloped the room.

"What are you guys, that you can talk about how the world should be and have the

confidence to insist on it?"

Ludwig, the man with the bandaged right arm, seemed to pierce through everyone with his hollow, deep eyes.

"Because it's the path for everyone."

At that, the corner of Ludwig's mouth curled up roughly.

"Right… That's the most magnificent justification."

"The one and only absolute justification to escape all misdeeds, sins, and responsibilities."

"That disgusting claim, that it's the path for everyone, was the driving force that brought you here, and it was the words you used to rationalize yourselves."

"For everyone?"

"No… No."

"That phrase exists for you."

"That phrase is for those who serve it."

"Only for you, and your excuses."

"Aren't you guys also accomplices in the Gate Incident? Right?"

"You just want to manipulate the world as you please."

"When the outcome goes wrong, do you plan to say, like anyone else in the world, that you never actually wanted this?"

"In front of this miserable result, do you plan to say that you never actually wanted this?"

"Then again, without facing the problems you got wrong this time, do you intend to control the world as you please?"

For the world.

For humanity.

For everyone.

Those words were nothing more than excuses prepared for those who wanted to do such things.

"So, what do you propose?"

The ones in black robes asked.

"Do you have the best answer? Who should be the next ruler of this world, and what needs to happen to completely eradicate the seeds of conflict and slaughter, and achieve peace?"

At that question, Ludwig shook his head.

"Is your statement that everything will be solved if Ellen becomes the emperor the right answer?"

"…"

"The Holy Knight Order has already sided with the Demon King, so if Ellen becomes the emperor, will they just support the Hero-turned-emperor and call it a day?"

"…There will be some interference, of course."

At that, Ludwig chuckled.

"What you're proposing is just one of the many methods. Whether the empire continues to exist, the world falls to the Demon King, or Ellen becomes the emperor, problems will arise somewhere, and someone will die somewhere."

"I used to think there was a right answer while living. That I was too stupid to reach that answer. That's what I thought."

"But now I know."

"That there's no such thing as a right answer - that was the only right answer."

"Didn't you guys each bear a little responsibility for all this?"

"No matter who became the next ruler of the continent, everyone would have a bit of the right answer, and a bit of the wrong answer."

"In other words, there's no such thing as a perfect answer."

"Even without you, the world will move on with slightly incorrect yet slightly correct other answers."

"I don't care about that."

"I don't need to think about the right answer."

"It's not about the answer, but the punishment."

"You who caused all this trouble, trying to be judged for your intentions rather than the outcome. People like you, who constantly push your own answers by claiming it's for the greater good."

"Removing people like you from the world."

"That's my job."

I don't know the answer.

It doesn't even exist.

But those who keep trying to control the world by claiming they've found the right answer after writing the wrong one.

Those who keep moving the world, claiming they have good intentions and trying to sacrifice someone without ever facing the consequences of their wrong answers.

Ludwig believed that such people must disappear from the world.

The words of the Black Order claiming that Ellen should become the emperor.

That could lead to a good ending.

However, the very existence of those who try to manipulate the world with such words from behind the scenes is disgusting.

Threatened by Ludwig's intimidating attitude, the others began to rise from their seats one by one.

"Christina, was this your purpose from the start?"

In response to the question of whether she had intended to bring Ludwig to the Order's gathering place from the beginning, Christina shrugged her shoulders.

"Although there are differences in the details, you could say that."

Christina sent a cold gaze towards those wearing robes.

Something began to creak.

Actually, it was planned.

Christina returned the words the emperor once wanted to say to these completely wrong people.

"If the world rolls on as you say, it's too disgusting."

In Christina's eyes, filled with hatred and anger, madness swirled.

Similar to Ludwig, but slightly different.

It was vengeance.

The ones who should be held responsible survive by claiming it's for the greater good.

As if she couldn't bear it any longer.

"So, you're no longer needed."

"You should know it's not just something you can say."

Their usefulness to each other.

From the beginning, the fact that they were using each other was a known truth.

The Black Order's mages prepared for something.

"Why, to summon the Immortals?"

"…!"

The moment her intention was read, Christina shrugged her shoulders while sitting.

"Didn't you know that you gave me the knowledge without any safety measures?"

There was no change in the fact that they had cooperated only temporarily under the pretext of the Gate Incident.

"Well, it's obvious. If I try to betray, you'd try to seize control of the Immortals. You would have already prepared for that."

"…"

"It would be strange if you didn't do such a thing."

At Christina's words, the mages fell silent.

The Immortals were controlled by magic. Therefore, it was inevitable that they would have such a means while entrusting the related technology to Christina's hands and completing it through the resources of the Empire.

In the absolutely necessary moment, the Immortals would inevitably become the Black Order's property.

Just as the emperor had permitted it while sensing the events that would occur when the Immortals were created, Christina had not thought they would be without such intentions.

Christina laughed.

She scoffed at the Order's mages.

"Do you really think it's too optimistic to assume that we followed your instructions exactly when creating the Immortals?"

"Do you think we could not tamper with the magic you provided?"

The knowledge the Black Order provided was vast and incalculable.

Merely implementing the method to create Immortals was already the realm of geniuses far beyond ordinary ones.

However, finding and modifying the hidden magical formulas within the Black Order's knowledge was impossible.

The Black Order had naturally anticipated their opponents' attempts.

They had provided the knowledge as if to say, "Try it if you can."

"You secret society people didn't anticipate how many unreasonable geniuses there are in the world, huh?"

This was a gathering of the continent's greatest geniuses.

Only those with talent knew just how unreasonable talent could be.

“…What, not working well?"

"…”

From their expressions, Christina could tell that her own schemes had worked, and she flashed a bitter smile.

The Black Order was not foolish.

It was simply that someone's genius had overwhelmingly surpassed someone else's expectations.

The Black Order had declined.

Their leaders had all died.

Even the last of their talented members had perished in the battle against the Demon King, turning to ashes.

What remained were the less remarkable members of the Black Order.

Sadly.

Just remnants.

They had a wealth of magic, visions, and secrets built up by their great leaders, but they could not even properly assimilate them.

The leftovers.

It was inevitable that they would be ignorant of the thought processes and dangers of geniuses.

All they could do with their remaining sense of mission was approach the geniuses of the empire and the Temple who wielded the empire's power.

That was their last option.

Those with power and talent had already died fighting the monsters of the Gate or the Demon King.

This was the limit of those who remained.

"In the end, this is how it turns out…"

One of the Order's mages finally lowered his head.

Who wouldn't have known that the situation would turn out like this?

They had tried to do something despite the premonition that everything would not go their way.

Those who had tried to manage the world from behind the scenes had become too weak to do so.

Still, they reached out to those who despised them and ended up joining hands.

It was a simple story.

They had tried to exploit each other, but in the end, the weaker side was exploited.

"Ludwig."

At Christina's soft call, a dark energy surged from Ludwig's right hand.

The black magic burst forth, taking the shape of a sword.

Ludwig slowly approached the mages awaiting their deaths.

CHAPTER 625

On a street in a ruined city.

"It's surprising that they didn't even try to run away."

Christina murmured quietly as she gazed at the Order's mages, who had been brutally slain.

It seemed like just a moment ago that Ludwig had summoned his ominous and eerie dark aura blade, but now his right arm was still intact, wrapped in a bandage.

The Order's mages were all slaughtered by Ludwig.

They didn't even attempt to flee.

"Did they know that trying to escape would be pointless?"

"I don't know."

Anna de Gerna, who had been waiting at a distance, approached, crossing over the rubble.

"There are no life forms detected nearby. This is… all of them."

Anna looked away from the lifeless bodies with a stern expression.

Even if they had tried to flee, they would have been caught by Anna's magic, and the waiting Immortal archmages were maintaining a barrier further out.

"There might be remnants left, but it's pointless. They won't be able to take the Immortal from us anyway."

With this, the Black Order had completely vanished from the world.

One or two might have been missed or survived, but their existence would be meaningless.

"It's a bit frightening to think that if it wasn't for Louis, we might have lost the Immortal altogether."

Christina forced a bitter smile and wet her lips.

The intention of the Black Order had been clear from the beginning.

That's why Louis had focused on uncovering the Black Order's schemes.

If it hadn't been for Louis, the Black Order would have tried to control the world by force, using the Immortal.

It wasn't even a contest of strength.

It was a battle of genius and strategy, with genius emerging victorious.

The Immortal, which the Black Order had wanted to turn into their army, had now become Christina's army.

"Ludwig, what do you think?"

"About what?"

"About Ellen becoming the Emperor, the Demon King becoming the Emperor, or everything remaining as it is."

Christina asked.

"What do you think is better?"

In response to Christina's question, Ludwig replied shortly, as if there was no need to think.

"I don't know."

It was a concise answer without any hesitation.

"Whatever it is, it'll work out somehow."

It was good to be ignorant of the unknown.

If there was something to be done, it would be done.

The affairs of the world were left to the world.

Ludwig answered as such and stared quietly at his right hand.

The Grandmaster's arm had granted Ludwig immense power.

Ludwig had obtained a power that had skipped several steps.

However, he could not get used to the foreign sensation in his body.

It was a procedure that a normal person couldn't endure.

'At most, a few years… '

The words of Dettomorian, predicting death.

Now, Ludwig truly understood what that meant.

He had endured a pain that was almost worse than death, and only recently had been able to properly move and function.

The limits of the flesh would eventually catch up.

The price for connecting what should not have been connected was being paid in real-time.

"Are you alright…?"

With concern, Anna examined Ludwig's complexion. Ludwig nodded with a stern expression.

His body was still holding up.

He was able to fight once again.

Until his body broke apart.

Until he finished what they had to do.

He only had to endure until then.

"Uh huh. I'm fine."

For now, at least.

"Report the status of the army's preparation for departure."

Emperor Bertus sat quietly in the General Headquarters tent, with only the telepath, Evia, before him.

Evia sent telepathic messages to each of the commanding officers of the army, and she reported the situation back after compiling their responses.

"The army is ready, Your Majesty."

Telepathy made the communication process more efficient.

Thus, Evia was able to act as a messenger without leaving her seat.

"We will begin our advance toward Grenosia tomorrow. It is predicted that it will take ten days to reach Grenosia. Our vanguard troops that have already set out will eliminate small-scale warp gates in advance, so we will engage in battle as soon as we arrive at Grenosia. Make sure that each commander is well-informed."

Handling small and medium-sized warp gates was now within the scope of the Immortal's capabilities.

Full-scale warfare would only be necessary when targeting large city-sized warp gates. The struggle to conquer large cities would become increasingly difficult, so if the attack on Grenosia was not smooth, future battles would become even more challenging.

If conquering Grenosia was difficult even with the unparalleled army of the Immortal, the remaining battles would become even more daunting.

The days had become warmer, and the army had enjoyed a long rest during the winter.

"Starting tomorrow, the army will not stop until we see the complete end of the Gate situation."

The emperor calmly issued his command, and Evia quietly relayed his words to all military commanders.

The atmosphere in the garrison, just before the departure, was more serene than bustling.

With a minimum amount of necessary supplies, including tents, prepared, they were about to embark on a long march.

It was as if a beast, having slept a long winter slumber, was ready to awaken.

From now on, there would be no such long rests.

Either the war would end, or humanity would be annihilated.

The army would march on until one of those paths was reached.

In such a quiet garrison, those who had been at the temple until now were also prepared for departure.

Christina.

Anna.

Louis Ancton.

And even Ludwig.

Naturally, everyone was astonished.

Ludwig, who was supposed to have lost his arm, had regained his right arm, though it was still wrapped in bandages.

"Ludwig? No, that arm…?"

At Ranian Sesor's question, Ludwig gave a clumsy smile.

"There was an experimental procedure, and I was the first subject."

"Are you alright…?"

"Yeah, surprisingly, it moves pretty well."

Ludwig demonstrated the normalcy of his arm by clenching and unclenching his fist, moving his arm up and down.

There was some procedure that could restore a lost arm.

No one had any idea what it was, so they were at a loss for words, watching Ludwig's nonchalant demeanor.

Getting his arm back was a good thing, but was he really in a state to fight?

Just by looking at his bandaged arm, Ludwig did not seem to be in a condition to fight.

As if aware of their concerns, Ludwig lowered his head.

"I won't be going into direct combat. I'll be assigned to a rear support unit. So you don't have to worry."

"Oh, I see…"

It was a lie.

Ludwig had been assigned to carry out a mission with the Immortal.

In a way, it was the most dangerous fight since the beginning of the Reclamation War. Ludwig felt no need nor reason to discuss such matters with his friends.

News of Ludwig's sudden return and his restored right arm had quickly spread throughout the Royal Class garrison.

Scarlett had no choice but to immediately seek out Ludwig upon hearing the news.

"Ludwig…?"

"Scarlett, it's been a while."

Scarlett stared at Ludwig's new right arm, her mouth agape in disbelief.

Ludwig told her, as he had explained to others, that he didn't know how his arm had been restored, and that he wouldn't be engaging in direct combat, so she shouldn't worry.

"Well, that's a relief…"

However, everyone felt uneasy upon seeing Ludwig's return.

Setting aside the restoration of his arm, they couldn't help but notice the change in Ludwig's demeanor.

There was a dark, gloomy energy surrounding Ludwig's eyes. Something was amiss in his disheveled appearance.

Anyone with a keen eye could see it.

The length of Ludwig's left and right arms was slightly off.

His right arm was a little longer. Just enough to be unnatural.

They couldn't know what kind of experimental procedure had been used, but it was obvious to everyone that it wasn't a normal one.

They couldn't help but feel a subtle sense of unease at the dangerous aura surrounding Ludwig's return.

"…"

"Cliffman, long time no see."

Ludwig also encountered Cliffman, who had previously urged him to withdraw from the battlefield.

Ludwig, who had left the battlefield as Cliffman advised not to cause trouble for

others, had ultimately regained his right arm through some means and returned.

As Ludwig greeted him with an attitude not much different from before, Cliffman stared back with a stern expression.

"You stubborn bastard…”

As if he had a premonition, Cliffman looked at Ludwig with a mixture of disgust and shook his head.

After exchanging greetings with familiar faces upon his long-awaited return, Ludwig prepared for the march and walked through the garrison as night fell.

Ludwig wouldn't fight alongside the Royal Class garrison or the main force of the alliance.

In fact, he would spend more time fighting alongside the Immortal than staying at the garrison.

He only exchanged greetings to avoid making his presence at the garrison seem strange.

However, not everyone believed Ludwig's lie.

"Hey…”

Heinrich von Schwarz.

Upon learning what was happening in the imperial capital, Heinrich couldn't help but harden his expression as he saw Ludwig, who had regained his arm and returned.

"Is it what I think it is?"

Heinrich immediately knew how Ludwig had regained his arm.

It was clear that he had received an arm reconstructed through black magic.

He had risked his life to regain his arm.

And they didn't know how he was overcoming the rejection reaction and other issues.

Heinrich, however, couldn't help but know that Ludwig was in a very dangerous state.

So, Heinrich knew that Ludwig's claim of not fighting was a lie.

"Did you really have to go that far?"

"I don't know."

At Heinrich's question, Ludwig gave a bitter smile.

"Perhaps even a nobody can do something…"

"…"

"I wanted to find out."

It had already happened.

It couldn't be undone.

Heinrich could say nothing to Ludwig, who had already committed the act.

With gritted teeth, Heinrich spat out the words.

"So you plan to fight and die, huh?"

Now, Heinrich seemed to understand what the prophecy of Dettomorian foresaw.

And so.

On a secluded hill near the royal-class garrison, Ludwig spotted someone silently observing the garrison from above.

Ellen Artorius.

Under the full moon's light, Ellen stood still on the hilltop, gazing down at the

garrison.

Ludwig wordlessly looked up at Ellen on the hill.

Ellen, who had pursued the case without questioning Ludwig's plea for help, eventually fled back to the garrison.

This was their first encounter since then.

Ellen's eyes slowly moved towards Ludwig.

There was no emotion in her gaze.

She said nothing.

She didn't ask how he returned or what happened to his arm.

She was neither bewildered nor frightened.

She just acknowledged that there was a person there, with no thoughts or emotions revealed.

"You've changed somehow."

Looking at Ellen, who seemed to have become a completely different person, Ludwig said so.

She had changed more than he had, to the point where she seemed rather strange.

Something had changed.

Everyone changes.

They become changed.

"…"

The lifeless-eyed Ellen gave no response or reaction.

She merely stood in the moonlight, silently gazing at Ludwig.

Ludwig asked no more questions of the still life in the moonlight.

The alliance forces moved.

Maintaining an army for a long time was a risk.

Ending it quickly was the only virtuous act in war. With sufficient power, the empire would now wage a swift war to destroy the warp gates throughout Riselen.

The empire had to pass through several small and medium-sized cities to reach their next destination. Thus, it would have taken a long time for the march, as it had been so far.

"They've swept through…"

But now, I was looking at a city devastated by smoke and flames.

"…I anticipated it would be terrible, but…"

What was the city's name?

I couldn't remember, but it was a city with one medium warp gate and two small warp gates.

However, all Eleris and I could see were the remnants of destruction and slaughter.

Small towns and medium-sized cities could be swept away in less than half a day, even by the Immortals alone.

I wanted to see the Immortals fight, but we arrived late, fearing that getting caught in their sight would cause trouble.

Eleris, who was always pale, looked even paler now.

Eleris couldn't help but be frightened by the strength of cornered humans.

The gate incident might have lost its meaning now.

"Depending on how the Grenosia occupation battle proceeds, the alliance forces might completely withdraw."

"That's a possibility."

If it seemed that the gate incident could be managed with only the immortals, the alliance forces might even disband.

"But each gate is becoming more dangerous. It would be foolish to hastily disband the alliance forces. Like it or not, they can't leave until all the warp gates in Riselen are destroyed."

The gate incident wouldn't be over until the last warp gate was destroyed.

If they hastily tried to withdraw the alliance forces only to find out that the immortals alone couldn't end the gate incident, they would have to reassemble the alliance forces. That would be a ridiculous endeavor.

In the end, the alliance forces had to exist until the complete end of the gate incident.

The Immortals were a large-scale unit and, at the same time, an army with incredible mobility advantages since the entire army could move using mass teleportation.

That was why the Immortal can wipe out these small and medium-sized cities by going back and forth across Riselen with a super-large mass teleport as if intercepting the enemy's stronghold.

"For now, we have to watch how the Grenosia battle unfolds."

As the war intensified and deepened, it was gradually coming to an end.

CHAPTER 626

Originally, until they reached their destination, Grenosia, the Allied Forces had to engage in several small-to-medium scale city sieges.

With the Immortals taking over the tasks of the Demon King's army and quickly and accurately neutralizing key points, the Allied Forces advanced vigorously.

However, the Allied Forces did not encounter any battles as they moved forward.

There were no monsters on the path they followed.

At best, only the remains of monsters that had already been reduced to pieces were left.

Regardless of the reason, it was a situation that anyone would gladly welcome.

Naturally, rumors spread that the Empire was operating a massive vanguard force.

But in the end, wasn't it a good thing that there were no battles?

Although the fact that the Empire was operating a powerful large-scale unit, which was now replaced by the Immortals, was not explained in detail, it was also something that the heads of each military had foreseen to some extent.

They couldn't know what kind of power the vanguard force had, but the fact that they were annihilating small-to-medium scale cities was undoubtedly a good phenomenon for the main force.

However.

Roaaaaar

Grenosia, where a large-scale battle was scheduled, had already been reduced to ashes by the vanguard.

“…What is this?"

Kono Lint couldn't help but see the scene before anyone else.

An unknown large-scale military force had not only destroyed small-to-medium scale cities but also the large city of Grenosia, and even the gates and monsters were completely wiped out.

No matter how much an army is a group prepared for war, there would be no one who truly enjoys battle itself.

Therefore, there was no reason to dislike the fact that the small-to-medium scale cities were already destroyed and that there was no need to fight in those places.

However, should they be happy that the major strategic point had already been destroyed?

Regardless of the reason, the fact that the expected major battle had already been won meant that there was no shortage of military resources.

But wasn't it strange?

Wasn't it strange that something of this magnitude was possible?

Surviving was good, and it was good that a large-scale battle didn't occur.

Despite the good news, a peculiar sense of unease and anxiety spread throughout the Allied Forces, and there was nothing they could do about it.

Instead of being excited about the disappearance of the planned large-scale battle, a strange sense of unease pervaded the Allied Forces' base.

At the high command's meeting place.

"Your Majesty, won't you tell us now?"

One of the commanders leading each army, who had gathered in the high command's tent, cautiously opened his mouth.

"Everyone knows that the Allied Forces have been operating a vanguard unit until

now. We also know that neither Lady Saviolin Turner nor the hero is affiliated with them."

Those who knew that the role the Immortals had taken over was previously handled by the Demon King's army, but the majority didn't.

Hence, they could only guess that the Empire was hiding a very powerful military force.

"If we have such a powerful ally and such an army, we should welcome them with open arms."

Why would they need to hide the existence of such a powerful ally? Wouldn't it be better to reveal the presence of such a powerful force to boost the morale of the Allied Forces?

It wasn't a wrong argument.

However, everyone felt uneasy in a situation where the army advanced without knowing the reason. "Your Majesty, I believe it is now necessary to inform the commanders at least about what is going on."

Bertus quietly listened to these words.

It was inevitable that the commanders of each army would feel confused in this situation, where the need for an assault on Grenosia had disappeared.

In the joint military command headquarters, where representatives of each army were gathered, seats were assigned according to rank, as if the emperor himself were sitting there.

And, of course, the one sitting closest to the seat of honor was none other than the commander of Kernstadt, Louise von Schwarz.

'How will the emperor respond?'

Naturally, she who had witnessed the experiment at the temple knew the meaning of the current situation of the allied forces.

Louise had no choice but to intuitively know that the army was on the move. And

because this army alone was powerful enough to capture a major city, she couldn't help but be tense.

It was a powerful army.

However, its origin was unknown.

Despite the good news that the empire possessed an unidentified powerful army, the commanders under the emperor's command were showing anxiety because they did not know the truth.

Would he tell the truth or keep it hidden?

Neither side could predict which would lead to a greater crisis.

Louise, too, could not determine which choice was better.

Secrets tended to spread as more people became aware of them. Thus, simply by revealing the fact that they were creating an army of the dead at the command center, it was inevitable that the entire allied forces would eventually learn about it.

An ominous and uneasy silence continued.

At that moment, when the emperor was about to make a decision and speak up.

"I'd rather not know."

The voice that broke the silence did not belong to the emperor.

The woman sitting very close to the high-ranking seat in the joint command headquarters' conference room, just like Louise von Schwarz, had a melodious voice filled with laughter that was almost irritating in the anxious atmosphere.

"Am I the only one who thinks that?"

It was the newly appointed Holy Knight Commander, Rowan.

Everyone was taken aback by the sudden remark of the new Knight Commander,

who said she would rather not know anything when everyone demanded the truth from the emperor.

Everyone was aware that a significant political change had occurred within the Five Great Religions, since the former Holy Knight Commander had suddenly been replaced, and a new Holy Knight Commander had taken office. However, only a few knew what exactly that internal situation was.

Those who knew kept their mouths shut, so no one knew what the change in the Holy Knight Commander's position meant.

Even if she was new to the position, there was no one in this place who could ignore the Holy Knight Commander.

Since the Holy Knight Commander's rank in the alliance was higher than that of most royalty, her right to speak was stronger than that of many kings.

Therefore, Rowan's words were not something that could be easily dismissed.

"Commander, what do you mean by that?"

In response to the question from the one who had demanded an explanation, Rowan tilted her head.

"It means that His Majesty must have had good reasons to keep it secret until now."

The emperor remained silent, and a suspicious hush filled the room.

"Everyone here must have noticed to some extent that there is a hidden force within the allied forces, right?"

"But the fact that we haven't been told what it is or what this hidden force consists of means that there must be a reason it can't be disclosed."

"If it's so difficult to talk about despite everyone's unease, doesn't it mean that it's something we shouldn't know?"

"That's why I'd rather not know."

"Because I believe there's a reason it's being kept secret."

At the words of the Holy Knight Commander, who claimed to trust the emperor, Louise felt nauseous.

She didn't know what the Demon King was really like, but Louise knew that Rowan harbored extreme hatred for the empire.

Moreover, she was the mastermind behind the massacre orchestrated by the empire.

Seeing her feign trust in the emperor so nonchalantly made Louise's anger boil.

'She must know, of course… '

Knowing that Rowan was acting like that while being aware of the truth made Louise feel as if her insides were turning.

"But if we know about the secret force within the allied forces, it would certainly… be more helpful for planning future operations."

"Even if it's a truth that would cause more problems if known?"

"What… do you mean?"

"You see, knowing it doesn't necessarily resolve our anxiety. Instead, it might reveal a truth that would make us even more anxious. Don't you understand what I'm saying, considering there's a reason it can't be revealed?"

Rowan spoke with a sweet, slow smile.

"Let's say it's a force that shouldn't be exposed externally. Can any of you confidently say that you shouldn't use that force anymore? It's a force so helpful that we don't even need to engage in the Gresonia campaign, which was expected to result in a massive loss of power."

If it were an ominous magic or a cursed force that was rightly powerful.

If the hidden force within the allied forces were something that could only be obtained through the hands of someone who should not be dealt with or something that would inevitably receive external criticism.

Would anyone here be able to assert that they should not use their power and end

this war solely with the power of the allied forces?

"I don't know exactly what it is, but we all have to admit that we need the hidden power of the allied forces, or more precisely, the hidden power of the empire in this war."

"Of course, if it's a power that must be kept secret, it's not a righteous one, right?"

"But if we know about such a force and still choose to remain silent, what would we become?"

"Accomplices."

The emperor's involvement with some kind of power was unknown.

However, knowing about that ominous, dark, and evil power and the emperor's involvement with it would be problematic.

The emperor leads the war with evil power. But if they knew the truth and remained silent because they needed that power, they would become accomplices of the empire and the emperor.

"Shouldn't you all appreciate that His Majesty's silence is for our sake?"

At the words of the Holy Knight Commander, everyone swallowed hard with a stiff expression.

Ignorance is bliss.

In any other situation, they might not have agreed, but at that moment, everyone felt that the saying was true.

There are things in the world that one should not know.

"Isn't trying to share the burden when His Majesty is willing to bear all the responsibility alone both meaningless and a blatant disregard for His Majesty's consideration?"

The Holy Knight Commander sought to protect the Emperor's secret.

But everyone present could feel that it wasn't out of respect for the Emperor.

A single crime.

Ignorance was best for the rest.

Whatever the matter, whatever wicked scheme was involved.

The Emperor's silence in response to the evidently malicious words of the Holy Knight Commander was evidence in itself.

If the Holy Knight Commander's words were baseless conjecture, the Emperor had no reason to stay silent.

The insinuation that the Imperial Emperor had committed an unforgivable, heinous crime was a great insult to the Imperial Family, the Empire, and the Emperor himself.

No matter how mighty the Holy Knight Commander was, she couldn't best the Emperor.

Despite the Holy Knight Commander's grave impropriety, the Emperor said nothing.

Everyone knew that his tolerance of the affront was a sign of his acquiescence.

Would they knowingly become accomplices?

Would they remain ignorant and prepare an excuse of not knowing anything later?

Looking at the silent crowd, now fearful of learning the truth, the Emperor slowly nodded.

"Thank you, Holy Knight Commander."

The Emperor looked at the Holy Knight Commander with an icy gaze.

"You're welcome, Your Majesty."

Rowan smiled at the Emperor, her eyes wide open.

"…"

The Duke of Saint-Owan silently observed the cold standoff between the two, sitting close to the throne.

When they had successfully captured Serandia, the Allied Forces were simultaneously elated and grieving.

Many had died, but the people held onto hope that they might finally be able to put an end to the Gate crisis, and for now, they had won the battle.

But gathering the monsters of the ruined Grenosia and burning them repeatedly was all the Allied Forces had to do.

“What happened?”

“Didn't the hero do something?”

“Is that so?”

“It seems there is an enormous force.”

The soldiers had their own conversations, while the commanders had theirs, each unable to help but comment on the bizarre and incomprehensible situation.

Once the cleanup of Grenosia was over, the Allied Forces would announce a new plan.

No one knew if they could pass through without any combat then, too.

“If this continues, won't we be unnecessary?”

“If we're unnecessary, what will we do when we return? Starve to death?”

“Yeah, it's better to stay in the military.”

“Anyway, it's a good thing.”

“Yeah.”

In the end, everyone was grateful for the safety of the day.

In the Allied Forces' base, the atmosphere was more perplexed than celebratory.

"In the end, we couldn't test the new equipment for Titan."

In the tent where the Duke's troops were stationed, Adelia murmured softly.

"Are you disappointed?"

"No, no! No! That's not what I meant!"

As Adelia waved her hands, the Duke of Saint-Owan lowered his head.

“……It's not a big deal. I'm also somewhat disappointed that we couldn't confirm Titan's second operation."

"Ah… Yes, me too……”

The second operation of Titan was supposed to be confirmed in this battle at Grenosia. They could have checked the improved Titan's condition, collected data, and determined which aspects needed to be refined.

The story could sound regrettable that the battle did not take place, depending on how one listened.

Of course, Adelia and Duke of Saint Owan, along with the duke's mages, had devoted as much time as possible to improving the Titan.

It wasn't just the battle at Grenosia that disappeared.

There were no battles in any of the intermediate locations either.

Even Adelia, who was busy with research and uninterested in external affairs, could not help but feel that something was strangely amiss.

"But really… what could it be?"

Adelia felt the same doubt everyone else did.

Important battles had vanished into thin air.

And nobody knew what had happened. Even those who attended the high command meeting knew only the fact that it was dangerous to inquire. Moreover, that was said not by the emperor but by the Holy Knights' commander.

The emperor barely spoke at all.

Duke Saint Owan also did not know what was happening.

"Adelia."

"Yes, Your Grace."

Duke Saint Owan, seated and looking down at the Titan blueprint, spoke.

"If you could sell your soul to a demon and end this war, would you do it?"

"…?"

Adelia could not help but be bewildered by the duke's unexpected question.

To sell one's soul to a demon.

There were quite a few legends about great demons lending power to dark mages through such contracts, but no one knew now whether those stories were true or not. They could be tales created to inspire fear in demons, or there could have been actual cases.

It was a mere figure of speech.

To sell one's soul to a demon.

To end this war in exchange.

Adelia fell deep in thought at the duke's question.

It was a tragedy, too great.

A tragedy had occurred, far too great.

To end this war, only her soul was required as the price.

But standing before her was Duke Saint Owan.

He was the father of Adelia's friend, and the family of righteous mages who were famous for never dabbling in wicked powers.

It was by no means wise to speak of selling one's soul to a demon in front of him.

"…I think I wouldn't."

Nevertheless, Adelia could only give such an answer.

Wasn't the price too cheap?

If my soul, my life, was the price to stop these tears and bloodshed, wouldn't there be countless people who would make such a choice?

Adelia couldn't help but cautiously gauge Duke Saint Owan's reaction after speaking.

Duke Saint Owan gave a bitter smile.

"…I think I would do it."

"…"

Even Duke Saint Owan, who had lived with a long-held belief, would say that.

It was such a terrible war that he would make such a choice, even if it meant abandoning the honor of his long-standing family and his own beliefs.

'The emperor must have made such a choice.'

Knowing that he would do the same, Duke Saint Owan could not help but realize that the emperor had reached out to some evil, even if he did not know exactly what had happened.

CHAPTER 627

"Ugh… ugh… ugh!"

"Ask for help."

"Gulp! Gulp! Gulp!"

-Creak!

In order to endure the pain, Ludwig bit into a gag and broke it. Louis Ancton watched this with wide eyes.

"It's going to hurt."

-Hisss!

As Christina poured an unidentified liquid onto Ludwig's shoulder, black smoke began to rise accompanied by a burning sound.

"Gulp! Cough… ugh!"

Ludwig's exposed right arm was boiling with dark shadows.

He tried to suppress his groans somehow, but his eyes were bloodshot with the stifled groans that continuously leaked out. Dead, black blood constantly flowed from the connection between his right arm and shoulder.

With a stern expression, Christina took some measures on Ludwig's arm, while Anna used magic to restrain his entire body to prevent him from struggling.

-Snap! Crack!

But the magic binding Ludwig was repeatedly destroyed and recast by the simple physical force emanating from his body.

Louis Ancton, who could not use magic directly, provided the necessary reagents,

medicines, and scrolls to Christina and Anna in a timely manner.

"Huff… ugh… ugh!"

"Just a little more, it will be over soon."

It was unbearable pain for a human.

Even in a state where it was difficult for an ordinary person to react to pain due to a lethal dose of analgesics, Ludwig's mind was being driven to the extreme.

There would have been rejection even if he had received a normal, healthy arm.

However, it was not an ordinary human arm, but rather one that had been enhanced with dark magic, which, to be precise, had become a massive magical entity itself.

Ludwig had managed to survive the shock of receiving the arm only because his vitality was extraordinarily tenacious.

As if receiving the protection of some unfathomable power, Ludwig endured the agonizing rejection that would have killed an ordinary person hundreds of times over.

Once Ludwig's condition finally stabilized, Christina, Anna, and Ludwig, all drenched in cold sweat, could breathe a sigh of relief.

"Are you feeling a bit better now?"

Christina asked, looking at Ludwig, who was shirtless and drenched in sweat.

"Yeah… it's bearable now."

The three of them knew that his words were false.

The pain only subsided, but it never disappeared completely.

It was just that the pain was no longer at a level where he had no choice but to scream. Ludwig was in a situation where he could only constantly feel pain surpassing throbbing in the connection of his right arm.

Ludwig's dark right arm hardly looked like it belonged to a living person.

Moreover, all the blood vessels that sprouted between his right arm and shoulder were dyed pitch black.

It was as if the right arm was corroding the flesh.

In reality, the poison of the dark magic-enhanced right arm was eating into Ludwig's flesh.

The arm of the Grandmaster.

In exchange for obtaining it, Ludwig gained immense power.

After wiping Ludwig's wet body with a towel treated with medicine, Christina began dressing his right arm.

The bandage itself was no ordinary item.

Not only was it treated with special medicine, but it was also a long magical scroll.

The long magic scroll that Louis had created and Anna had realized was designed to control Ludwig's rejection reaction and prevent the dark magic energy from leaking out.

While there were issues with its appearance, the bandage itself played a role in protecting Ludwig's body.

Anna looked at Ludwig with a pitiful expression.

"Ludwig… the rejection reaction cycle is getting shorter."

“…There's always a price to pay for cheating."

The power he obtained was not earned through effort.

Therefore, Ludwig bitterly smiled, thinking that it was only natural for him to endure this much pain.

Ludwig had been the only living human who had participated in the battle of

Grenosia on his own.

In that battle, not a single person had been sacrificed.

Wasn't that proof enough of his usefulness?

With that alone, he was no longer an insignificant person.

He had accomplished something.

So even if he died in vain, it wouldn't be a meaningless death.

But just a little more.

While his body still moved, just a little more.

He could still do something.

His body felt like it would break, but it wasn't broken until it was truly broken.

If they could end the war without anyone fighting like this, could it not be considered a life with some meaning?

The limit would come someday due to the rejection reaction, but it had not yet arrived.

Enduring the pain was not difficult.

Pain was but a fleeting moment.

He was just afraid of his body breaking apart.

Amidst the pain, Ludwig's eyes were bloodshot as he breathed heavily.

Being the commander of the Holy Knights was a very strange position.

By now, even though their power had weakened, they still possessed enough strength within the alliance to be considered in the top five, and among those, they

were a group with the most important power on the battlefield – the power of healing.

There was no force within the alliance that could ignore the Holy Knights.

There was no one who could point out the commander's rudeness.

And rudeness did not matter much.

Trying to find out could lead to getting hurt.

Seriously hurt.

How did they think they had obtained the power that was on par with the main forces of the alliance?

It was clear that it was not an honest power since it was kept secret.

It was also clear that they could not easily give up on this very powerful force.

Just how wicked were the means involved to make such a thing possible?

No matter what they imagined, the fact that they should not find out about it did not change.

As the commander of the Holy Knights had said, they should be grateful that the emperor had kept it a secret thus far.

If they knew, they might have to bear joint responsibility.

That's why they realized they had to close their ears to the truth.

And another fact that everyone came to know.

The new commander of the Holy Knights was an extremely unpleasant person.

And, separately from that, she seemed to know the truth.

"It's rather annoying that someone like her is in that position."

"What can we do about it? It's the same for me and Reinhardt."

After the meeting, Bertus sarcastically smiled at Saviolin Turner, who looked very uncomfortable in his tent.

Although Bertus himself had little to say, Saviolin Turner was filled with the intention to cut off the new commander's neck immediately if an order were to be given, without caring for the consequences.

If Reinhardt had not appeared just in time, Rowan would have been the one who tried to turn the Imperial Capital into ashes.

It was difficult to bear the sight of such a person, acting as if nothing had happened, sitting in the position of the Holy Knight Commander with a calm expression on her face.

"Simply moving as I intended is enough. It's difficult to expect her attitude to be satisfactory as well."

In the end, regardless of the Holy Knight Commander's attitude, it was enough that she had managed to steer the situation so that people would no longer raise suspicions, according to Bertus's intention.

Moreover, rather than moving his chess pieces as he wished, it was a better situation when the opponent moved as he intended.

Rowan eventually spoke and moved as Bertus intended. Whether she spoke according to her own intentions or not, it was within the expected range.

Subduing Grenosia with only Immortals was bound to cause a great ripple in the allied forces.

Would they wage war without expending forces, causing noise instead? Bertus chose between saving Immortals for the decisive moment or causing a disturbance.

"By the way, what was the damage rate?"

"It was about 8 percent."

Since there couldn't be no casualties, there was no choice but for the Immortals to

suffer a loss of power.

"It's an interesting army. Even if they're damaged like that, they just need to be repaired and sent back to the battlefield…"

Humans were modified into golems. That's why it's not death, but damage.

Immortals are a force that cannot die, but they are also an army that can be repaired even if damaged.

As long as the war can be carried out with only Immortals before the main force is needed, they would continue to wage war with only Immortals.

"It really seems like there's not much time left."

Turner knew what was running out of time.

However, was it really just the end of the Gate incident?

Saviolin Turner Turner looked at the emperor with a sad expression.

"Speaking of battle data… I wonder if this makes sense."

In the Grenosia campaign, only one human participated.

Excluding that one person, the rest were all Immortals.

Ludwig.

Bertus knew, of course, what had happened to Ludwig.

Ludwig had gained a power that far exceeded his original abilities.

"Is it possible to do this just by receiving one arm transplant?"

Bertus narrowed his eyes as he scanned Ludwig's body and combat data.

It was already too late when Bertus tried to stop it.

It was after Christina had performed the procedure on Ludwig.

"Strictly speaking, it's not an arm transplant, but rather an implantation of dark magic, they say."

The arm of a human who was strong even in life, strengthened further with dark magic. More powerful and robust magic circuits were embedded, of course, and alchemy was used to infuse even greater power.

It was not a concept of an arm transplant.

It was more like having received a massive magic itself.

“…Is that even possible?"

"It is said to be impossible."

“…What? So, they made something impossible possible?"

"No, Your Majesty."

Saviolin Turner Turner shook her head.

"They're just barely enduring something impossible."

They forced themselves to possess something they couldn't originally have.

Thus, they would soon be ruined.

However, Ludwig's problem was ultimately a personal one.

It wasn't a choice forced upon by someone else.

Ludwig had chosen this path for himself.

The real issue lay elsewhere.

The true problem of the Immortals.

At the moment, the Immortals belonged to the Emperor, but that could change at any time.

The true masters of the Immortals were the three mages who created them.

The Empire's mages couldn't manage the Immortals either, given the situation. There was no need, as the foundation was already complete.

The Immortals were a force for war.

Thus, they would be unnecessary once the war ended.

However, those who wielded the Immortals were already thinking about their use after the war.

How to deal with this.

Importantly, though the three mages who led the research had received knowledge from the Black Order, the Empire's mages had also taken part in the experiments.

It was impossible to wrest control of the Immortals, but they had learned what would happen if they carelessly interfered with the three mages.

The results of the Empire's mages' analysis lay before Bertholdus.

"Intuitive and obvious, but that makes it all the more difficult."

Although the contents were complex, the crucial information was brief.

Saviolin Turner's eyes widened at the Emperor's reaction.

"Is there a way to neutralize the Immortals?"

During the ongoing war, it was unfortunate that they had to search for a way to neutralize such an efficient weapon rather than admire its usefulness. But at that moment, it was of the utmost importance.

"No, if we try to neutralize them, even stranger things will happen."

"Stranger things, you say?"

"If Christina is killed, it seems that the Immortals will become indiscriminate slaughter weapons thereafter."

"What?!"

Christina had created a safety measure.

If someone tried to meddle with it, the Immortals would become slaughter weapons without any ally recognition.

Saviolin Turner clenched her teeth.

Who was this method for?

"Why would she do such a thing…?"

"She knows that we cannot interfere, and she probably allowed us to learn about it on purpose."

"…"

It wasn't to slaughter people.

"I can feel her intent, clear as day. 'Don't meddle in my affairs, and when everything is over, just quietly die.' That's what she wants."

She was doing this to save someone.

She was planning this for the sake of peace.

In the past, neither the Demon King nor the Emperor knew that the Gate incident would occur if they continued on this path.

That was why the Gate incident happened.

Christina knew about the events that befell the two of them.

So, she was showing them the right answer this time.

The Immortals would be the greatest threat after the Gate incident.

Killing a petty alchemist who intended to kill them with the Immortals wouldn't be difficult.

It would be an easy task, something they could do right away.

However, since they couldn't know what would happen if they killed Christina, they couldn't make that choice until the Gate incident was over.

Now they knew the right answer.

If they killed Christina, the rampaging Immortals would destroy the world in place of the monsters.

Then, it would be impossible to dismiss the notion that they were doing these things for a specific purpose as mere hypocrisy.

If the Immortals rampaged, the strong would survive.

They could use teleportation or escape to a place far beyond the reach of the Immortals' attacks.

In the end, only those who couldn't possibly possess such powers would die mercilessly.

The group that claimed to have done all this for a purpose couldn't choose to kill the Immortals for their own survival from the start.

The moment they made that choice, they might survive, but their justification and purpose up to that point would vanish.

This was a malicious taunt and provocation.

If they cared so much for the world and the weak, they should prove it.

Killing them would be easy.

They wouldn't run away.

If they killed them, they could live.

But could they make that choice?

If they chose that path, Christina would laugh mockingly at their hypocrisy until her

dying breath.

If they couldn't choose?

Then, they would be hunted by the Immortals after the Gate incident.

It wasn't that they were being forced down a single path.

There was a way, a very comfortable one, but it was a path that denied everything they had done up to that point.

But the moment they took that path, they would negate all their past actions.

Christina had presented them with two options.

"So, in the end, it's a simple choice."

Die.

Only they would die.

Live.

Only they would live.

CHAPTER 628

Grenosia had always been in ruins, but now it was completely devastated.

Thousands of Master-class warriors, over a thousand Archmages, and ten Grandmasters.

The scene of the massive destruction they had caused could be seen from a distant mountain range.

"The Black Flame Dragon of the right arm…"

"…What? Black Flame?"

"…You don't need to know."

"You sometimes say things I can't understand at all. What are you talking about?"

Harriet tilted her head at my mumbling.

The right arm… that thing.

When did such a thing become fashionable?

No, was it ever fashionable?

Although not an actual dragon, Ludwig had ended up wearing something similar.

I had never seen Ludwig fight in person. But when I had predicted that some kind of grafting would be done on his right arm, I expected something like this would happen.

"Do you think he's trying to graft his legs and left arm too?"

Rowan asked with a disgusted expression.

"…It doesn't sound plausible, but considering it's Ludwig, it's scary to think he might

actually try it."

It wasn't just any arm, but the arm of Larken Simonstite.

That was a rather malicious development. If I were the real Valier, I would have been furious, running around in anger.

How dare you use my master's arm? I would say.

But, strictly speaking, Valier Junior had never properly learned swordsmanship in the first place.

I wondered if Airi would be very sad.

Having enjoyed the right arm, he wanted to graft the other side as well. That was just a rumor.

Ludwig's condition was worrisome, but the power he had actually obtained was real.

"I have a feeling he's gained power comparable to a Grandmaster. I haven't fought him myself, though."

"Can he achieve that just by grafting one arm?"

"I'm not sure. I don't know the details, but it seems like it's more than just attaching a new arm."

"Hmm…"

Although Harriet had a vast understanding of magic, she had never seen the magic that created the Immortals.

"Immortals are one thing, but a Grandmaster…"

In an unstable state where he could explode at any moment, Ludwig had obtained real power.

"At this point, it's not easy to mess with him. I can't help but think it would have been better to deal with him sooner."

He hadn't just become slightly stronger; he had gained power that surpassed several levels at the cost of his life.

It was possible because he was the protagonist, but being the protagonist also led to greater suffering.

"Just observe and leave him be. If we wanted to eliminate him because he was dangerous, we would have started with the Immortals."

There were too many things they had left alone to be sensitive about Ludwig now.

If they touched Ludwig, more strange and bizarre things would happen.

Rowan informed me of the Allied Forces' situation.

With the Grenosia campaign no longer necessary, chaos had erupted within the Allied Forces. There were even commanders who demanded an explanation from the Emperor himself.

And Rowan had managed to draw the aggro and block the questions in her own way.

Judging by the way she spoke, it wasn't pleasant, but she had achieved her goal by keeping the secret.

"How's the seizure of the Holy Knights' Order coming along?"

"I can't say things were going smoothly. Everyone knew that Eleion Bolton was forced into retirement. Naturally, the resentment towards him was focused on me. That's why I wish the Battle of Grenosia had really happened. Then I could have seen who listened to me and who didn't."

In battle, one could discern who trusted the commander and who didn't.

It seemed that Rowan regretted it, as if she wanted to taste the thrill of the fight.

"If you keep acting like you crave bloodshed, it won't end well for you."

“…Understood."

Having a mad dog that only listened to me was both a blessing and a curse.

Eleion Bolton remained silent.

If Eleion Bolton had been the Holy Knight Commander, he wouldn't have said anything this time. Then, perhaps, the secret would have been shared among the top brass.

Rowan acted brazenly. It was clear that she was doing so out of necessity.

As a result, they could keep the secret as Bertus wanted, but the Holy Knight Commander's image became detestable.

"If you behave strangely, it's not you who suffers, but me. You're already a nuisance to humanity by existing, do you want to cause me trouble too?"

"Is, is that so…"

Rowan hung her head at my harsh words.

This mad woman had a wicked disposition.

Of course…

In the end, the one who should die first was me.

Whenever I felt unqualified to judge someone's right or wrong, I wanted to bite my tongue.

"I'll be more careful in the future. I am your face, after all."

"…Why does that make me feel worse?"

That's right.

No matter what a detestable person does, they remain detestable.

Look at this.

Even if she listens well, it still feels off.

Just look at our idiot.

She's cute just by being still.

“…Why are you looking at me like that?"

No, I wasn't doing that just now!

Isn't it wrong to feel even worse when showing goodwill?

"I know there's nothing I can do about being mean, but try to live well on your own."

"I'll bear it in mind."

"If you mess up and get caught by the wrong person, you're done for."

Rowan worked well and produced the desired results.

And the problem wasn't Rowan's personality, but also her character.

From now on, Rowan's duties would inevitably earn her the hatred of many and create numerous enemies.

"Do you know how dangerous the work you'll be doing is?"

"Of course."

She seemed clueless.

"Who should we capture first?"

"You know."

No matter how off-putting or worrisome,

Rowan's loyalty never wavered.

"Louise von Schwarz."

"I knew it."

That's right.

It's just like an overdose Antirianus.

"No matter how I think about it, this is strange."

At Erich de Lafaeri's words, everyone sitting in the makeshift barrack fell silent.

Cayer Voiden, Erich, Kono Lint, Cliffman, and Heinrich.

The four of them felt that the situation was turning odd, partly because they hadn't experienced the anticipated large-scale battle.

"If we don't have to fight, that's a good thing. I don't really care."

Cliffman lay on a makeshift bed in the barrack, staring blankly at the ceiling.

"Ellen kept moving with us, didn't she? It wasn't even Ellen's troops that moved. No, even if they did move, could such a thing be possible?"

Erich's question was valid.

The coalition's strongest force was, of course, Ellen and Saviolin Turner, with the elite troops they led, the Shanafel and the Royal Mage Corps.

However, Ellen hadn't moved, and yet Grenosia had been annihilated.

No matter how good things may be, an inexplicably good event is bound to feel unsettling.

"Could the Empire have developed some incredible secret weapon?"

Cayer furrowed his brow as he muttered.

"Could there be another Titan?"

"It's probably not a Titan. I asked Adelia, and she said that the Titan hadn't been activated."

"Then it must be some other weapon, but why would they need to keep it hidden?

And if it's powerful enough to conquer a metropolis, wouldn't it make armies obsolete?"

"We won't know for sure until something is definitively revealed."

The main conversation was between Cayer and Erich.

Cliffman seemed uninterested.

Kono Lint and Heinrich, on the other hand, remained silent.

"Lint, do you have any suspicions?"

"Uh, um… I don't know."

"…Why are you reacting like this? Aren't you curious?"

"Uh? No, no! Of course, I'm curious. I was just thinking about it, wondering what it could be…"

Kono Lint didn't know all the details.

However, he knew that the Empire was using the corpses of fallen soldiers for something, having been dragged around by Reinhardt.

It was definitely something related to the undead.

And he knew that Reinhardt was fighting on the battlefield.

However, he also had a sense that Reinhardt's forces weren't large enough to single-handedly conquer a metropolis.

Kono Lint knew that what happened in Grenosia was related to the undead weaponry being developed by the Empire.

That's why he couldn't join the conversation carelessly. He might accidentally let slip information he shouldn't reveal.

Because of Kono Lint's unconvincing answer, Erich turned his gaze to Heinrich.

"Heinrich, did your sister tell you anything?"

"Not really? I haven't seen her since I've been here. I doubt she knows anything either…"

Heinrich had seen it with his own eyes.

What kind of army was being created, and what power they possessed.

And that their classmates were deeply involved in the Empire's secret weapon this time as well.

Heinrich knew the most secrets that should never be revealed externally in this place.

Not only about the Immortal, but also the fact that the current Holy Knights were essentially the Demon King's army - Heinrich was the only one present who knew this.

Although he didn't know that the Empire had decided to call that army the Immortal, he intuitively knew that the Immortal had been deployed to the front lines and were proving to be a formidable force, as expected.

It was a truth he couldn't speak of even if his mouth was torn open.

"Isn't it a problem we can't easily think about?"

Curiosity breeds trouble.

To quell that curiosity, Heinrich looked at everyone and opened his mouth.

"Even if the Gate incident comes to an end, the empire has much to prepare for. Thus, even if they possess overly powerful weapons or technology, there's no need to disclose them to the entire coalition. They could be misused."

Issues such as human conflict, power struggles, or the Demon King's problem were inevitable. It was not as if the empire was being overly cautious or secretive; they were simply being prudent and crossing the bridge after checking its sturdiness.

"…When you think about it, that makes sense."

The universal desire of a group to keep a powerful weapon to themselves might not be so strange that it warranted being treated as top-secret information, even among allies.

After the war was over.

Was it hopeful that they could think about that? Or should they be worried about the issues that would arise after that point?

Heinrich was thinking about the latter.

It was a powerful army.

But excessively powerful strength was dangerous in and of itself.

Moreover, the Demon King was slowly corroding both the coalition and the empire, unbeknownst to the people.

"True, the Demon King… Reinhardt might try to seize the empire's secret weapon, so it's appropriate to keep it a secret…"

Erich's quiet speculation mentioned the Demon King's name, and naturally, the atmosphere froze.

The Demon King and the Gate incident were magic words that justified everything.

The Demon King.

The empire kept its secrets because of the Demon King.

But of course, both Kono Lint and Heinrich couldn't help but feel a lump in their throats when the Demon King's name was mentioned in such a way.

"Isn't it strange, though?"

Cayer picked up on Erich's suspicion.

"If the Demon King… wants to destroy humanity, couldn't he do it anytime?"

"How would he dare? There's the coalition, the Titans, and now it seems we even

have some sort of secret weapon. How can he touch us?"

Erich's words made Cayer silently look at his friend.

Although he had become incomparably stronger, a seasoned warrior, and a holy knight compared to the past, his friend's naivete seemed incurable.

Cayer was a gentleman, even when disappointed.

Kono Lint and Heinrich didn't even expect anything in the first place, so they didn't feel disappointed.

You're just like that.

In a similar vein.

“…Are you crazy? Why would the Demon King attack here?"

"To destroy humanity, right?"

"Do you think people only live here?"

“…Huh?"

"The whole thing would end if the Imperial Capital were attacked."

At Erich's reaction, which suggested that he had never even considered that possibility, Heinrich and Kono Lint couldn't help but be surprised, beyond not expecting anything.

Even Cliffman, who was absentmindedly staring at the ceiling, shifted his gaze towards Erich.

To have that expression only now.

Everyone was astounded by Erich's naivete in their own way.

"The Demon King… If that bastard Reinhardt really wants to destroy humanity, why would he attack here? If he takes away our place to return, that's the end of everything. We'll all die out once our supplies are cut off. It's simple. Is this a difficult

concept?"

It wasn't a thought or idea that only someone with great intelligence could come up with.

The Demon King had continuous opportunities to destroy humanity. Even now, in reality, there was always an opportunity.

However, the Demon King did not destroy humanity.

It was such an obvious thought, yet one that nobody entertained.

They merely assumed that he was biding his time for a more sinister reason or scheme.

Inferring the thoughts of a demon was impossible, so they were certain of his intentions but not of his methods.

Erich's perplexity was evident in his expression at Cayer's rebuke.

"So, why doesn't he?"

"…"

"…"

"…"

Seeing Erich finally have a thought that everyone else had considered to some extent, the three remained silent.

What could they do about this?

"Enough."

Cliffman, who had been lying quietly, spoke softly.

"End it there. There's nothing good to come from talking more."

With a stern expression, Cliffman spoke.

"After all, our duty is clear."

They were an army to put an end to the Gate incident.

"We only need to focus on that."

There was no need to defend, criticize, or speculate on the Demon King's intentions.

As the mere act of discussing it was dangerous, Cliffman cut off the topic altogether.

Heinrich silently stared at Cliffman.

It was a dangerous subject and one that shouldn't be raised.

However, Heinrich knew that a moment would come when they could no longer avoid addressing it.

CHAPTER 629

Nighttime.

-Thunk

A wooden cup struck the table, emitting a dull sound.

-Thunk

Again.

-Thunk, thunk

And twice more.

-Thunk

The owner of the cup was tapping it against the table.

Sitting across from her was Rowan, the Commander of the Holy Knights, conspicuously showing off the fact that she had snuck in wearing a robe with the hood flipped over her head.

And the owner of the barracks.

Louise von Schwarz was idly tapping the wooden cup on the table.

It was an incomprehensible act.

Though she had invited the Commander of the Holy Knights who had suddenly shown up in the middle of the night, Louise only engaged in this inexplicable behavior.

"Shall I come back later?"

As if to say that she would return when it was more convenient for Louise if she

wasn't up for conversation, Rowan looked at Louise with a bright smile.

Silently, Louise pushed the wooden cup towards her instead of answering.

"…?"

Rowan couldn't help but look puzzled as Louise suddenly pushed the cup toward her.

"Is this for me?"

"Take it as you please."

Louise saw that there was some liquid in the cup she had pushed in front of herself.

It contained an opaque, milky liquid.

A cup offered out of the blue, with an unidentified liquid inside.

Rowan picked up the cup and downed its contents in one gulp.

Louise quietly observed Rowan emptying the cup with a clatter.

"Ugh…"

After emptying the cup, Rowan placed it back down and covered her mouth, taking a few deep breaths.

"…I drank it, thinking I wouldn't mind if it were poison. But I'd rather it be poison. What is this?"

Gagging,

She pretended to retch.

"It's incredibly thick, sour, and sticky. It's very unpleasant… What is this…?"

Rowan, whose expression didn't usually change easily, appeared uneasy.

"Is this alcohol?"

In conclusion,

It was a strange liquid that couldn't be called anything other than alcohol, even though it was unidentifiable.

Louise nodded silently.

"The priests of the Tu’an have a rule about abstaining from alcohol too."

Malicious.

The taste of the alcohol itself was a problem, but the fact that she had offered it was as well.

"There's also a rule about not killing."

"That's true."

Rowan nodded calmly.

It was strange for an inquisitor who had tortured and killed countless people to bring up such a rule in the first place.

"There must also be a rule about chastity."

"You'd be surprised how well I keep that one."

Louise stared intently at the composed face of the Commander of the Holy Knights.

"Anyway, it seems the Commander enjoys this kind of alcohol? There are various local traditional liquors, so if my reaction earlier was rude, I apologize first."

There must be a village somewhere in the world that drinks such vile alcohol. Therefore, Rowan apologized first for frowning at the sight of the princess of Kernstadt drinking this repulsive liquor alone in the barracks.

However, Louise shook her head.

"I wouldn't know about any vile traditional liquors like that."

"Um… So it's not?"

"That's right, it's not."

"Then may I ask why you're drinking such a vile liquor?"

Rowan couldn't understand why Louise would drink such a strange liquor, especially since it wasn't a traditional one.

"It's a secret brew."

"Ah… I see?"

"Yes, I've confiscated the liquor the soldiers brewed themselves."

That's why she wasn't emptying the glass, but rather, staring blankly at the liquid inside.

"It's quite incredible. People's blood and tears are wrung out to support the army, and someone is brewing liquor with those blood and tears. Should we call that effort…?"

Louise bit his lip.

"Isn't it pitiful…?"

Even the horribly foul-tasting liquor was considered liquor, and they went through the trouble to brew and drink it.

"How do you think we should deal with the soldiers who brewed the illicit liquor?"

Louise looked intently at Rowan.

"They should be killed."

"Why should they be killed?"

"Because food is precious."

"Why is food precious?"

"Because without it, people starve to death."

"Are you saying they should be killed because they harmed resources related to life and death?"

"Exactly."

Louise continued to look at Rowan.

But she just looked, Louise said nothing.

When the moon was pointed out, one should have looked at the moon.

One shouldn't have scolded the finger pointing.

But that was impossible and meaningless.

Anyone could make empty talk.

So why was the moon, which everyone could point at, so important?

It didn't matter who pointed it out, the moon had no meaning to begin with.

"Do you want to save them?"

At Rowan's innocently asked question, Louise shook her head.

"What are you talking about? They're already dead."

"Then why did you ask?"

There was no meaning to the question and answer from the beginning, as the conclusion had been reached and executed.

There were soldiers who brewed the illicit liquor.

The soldiers who somehow made it.

The soldiers who secretly shared and drank it.

Louise ordered them killed.

And she confiscated all the illicit liquor they brewed and took a sip of it.

It was just a horribly tasteless and unpleasant white liquid.

They died while making this worthless thing.

"For these petty thieves who stole rations, we cut off their heads…"

Louise looked at Rowan.

"But the woman who stole countless lives and even the entire Order is parading around as the Commander of the Holy Knights, stirring up trouble here and there…"

"And."

"I, to such a despicable and evil thief…"

"Can't even pour a bucket of cold water, let alone a sword."

The small thieves were punished.

The heaviest punishment of taking their lives was imposed on the small thieves.

But she couldn't even question this great thief about her theft.

Then why did the small thieves have to die?

Why did they have to die?

Why were they killed?

Only the small ones were trampled.

No, only the small ones had been trampled.

In the end, Louise wanted to bite her tongue.

From the moment she killed her brothers with her own hands, she had no right to

blame anyone.

In the end, what was the difference between having a different kind in front of the mirror and cursing at it?

Louise was miserable whether she spoke or remained silent.

Filled with self-loathing, sorrow, and indignation, Louise von Schwarz stared at the Holy Knight Commander with blurry eyes.

"Enough. Whatever it is, tell me your purpose."

Seeing Louise take on a posture of conversation, Rowan whispered quietly in the barracks filled with the bitter smell of the illicit liquor.

"The Demon King has chosen you."

"…"

Louise was silent.

She had suspected that she would face such a situation.

No, it must have been a messenger's choice, not the Demon King's.

The bright expression on the face of this Demon King worshiper, as if she was telling her to be grateful and happy, revealed that fact.

For a very long time, Louise did not respond.

How much time had passed?

Louise opened the barrel beside her, scooping up a bowl of the illicit brew.

And she drank.

As if she couldn't bear it without drinking.

As if she was downing a cup of poison.

‘Moonshine.’

Drinking the liquid that had been robbed of its name by something else.

Not poison but a strange brew.

After drinking a bowl of such a concoction, she wiped her mouth and muttered quietly with her clear eyes,

"Terrible… taste."

How could a drink made of blood and tears be sweet?

"Having Kernstadt is as good as half of the coalition forces coming over."

I couldn't help but tilt my head at Charlotte's words.

“…Isn't it less than half?"

"Don't you think I know that the actual scale is not that much? Yes, the real power of Kernstadt within the coalition forces is less than half, and strictly speaking, it wouldn't even be a quarter."

"So."

Charlotte and I were sitting alone in the Lazak Elder Council Chamber, talking.

"But look, say a small, provincial country with a force of about a thousand soldiers sided with us. What would happen the moment that insignificant ruler declares he will side with the Demon King?"

“…If they don't want to die, they wouldn't do such a thing. But if they do, they'd be lucky to die quickly, I guess."

"They would be killed instantly, right?"

"Yes, that's right."

It was obvious that the moment those with little power or influence unexpectedly declared support for the Demon King, their heads would roll.

Were they talking about something like too big to fail?

"If a small country's ruler does such a thing, people would think it's crazy and move on. But if a great power like Kernstadt makes that decision, people will naturally think. Why would a country like Kernstadt suddenly support the Demon King at this timing? Would they think the same way or not?"

“…Would they?"

If it isn't so, would there be smoke from a chimney?

If a great power like Kernstadt were to suddenly make such a decision, fierce criticism would surely follow, but of course, a tremendous shock would also accompany it.

Why on earth would Kernstadt?

What was it lacking?

"But would only Kernstadt stand up? We also have the Holy Order, don't we?"

"That's right."

Let's say that at the same time as Kernstadt, the Holy Order also declared their support for the Demon King.

The number one vassal state, Kernstadt.

The Holy Order.

Not one madman, but two.

Kernstadt was the largest nation, excluding the empire.

The Holy Order was a force that transcended nations.

If both groups began to openly support the Demon King, everyone would naturally

feel that something serious was going on.

"Everyone will have to choose, whether to support the Empire or the Demon King."

It's absurd for humanity to support the Demon King in the first place.

However, the moment these two major forces reveal it openly, people will have to seriously consider whether or not to support the Demon King.

Of course, the deliberation would be carried out not by the majority of humanity, but by the leaders and the top brass of the powers.

They would have no choice but to do whatever it took to survive.

There would be forces that claimed they could never side with the enemy, even if it meant a desperate struggle.

Survival was the ultimate good, and there would be factions claiming to be on my side for that very reason.

The victory of the Demon King, or the victory of the Empire.

Those who wished to survive had to start making predictions.

Thus, Charlotte's statement that more than half had crossed over was not wrong.

The moment the other powers realized the two great powers were on my side, their leaders would begin placing their bets amidst immense chaos.

In reality, although Kernstadt was not exactly half, more than half of the shaken and rearranged power structure would be filled by those on my side.

"It's funny, not long ago everyone was frustrated that they couldn't kill me, and now this has become possible."

"How common is it to serve a king you hate enough to want to kill, just because he's a king?"

“…Well, if you put it that way, it doesn't seem like such a strange thing after all."

Just as there would be those who would fight me even at the risk of their own lives, there would also naturally be those who would crawl under the Demon King to survive.

Whether the former were the majority or the latter were, it was impossible to know, but it was clear that the latter would not be a small number.

"Anyway, all these assumptions are based on the precondition that Louise von Schwarz supports me…"

"That's right."

Louise von Schwarz.

Charlotte was the one who suggested that the first person I needed to bring on board for the upcoming events was her.

It was a ridiculous thing.

If I had done nothing, Louise von Schwarz would have died at the hands of Bertus, falsely accused of the Heinrich assassination.

In the end, both Louise and Heinrich survived.

And so, it became possible to consider the likelihood of Louise joining my side.

Ultimately, though the Holy Knight Order and the Five Great Religious Orders alone could shake the alliance, it would be impossible to secure any significant power without capturing Louise von Schwarz.

The precondition had to be met first, even if only to sketch out a plan.

I had left it to Rowan, but until I heard the confirmation, there was no way of knowing what would happen.

"Last year, I wouldn't have known, but now the situation has changed a lot, and Louise has learned quite a bit."

What the Empire was doing.

And that I had taken control of the Religious Orders.

I still didn't know if she knew about the Gate incident.

Louise knew that it was not strange at all for her to join my side at this timing.

There was no reason for her to fight me to the death.

And she knew that the scales were tipping in my favor.

However, in truth, it did not matter whether Louise knew such trivial facts and truths.

Putting everything else aside, Louise knew that she had to join my side to survive.

"Louise von Schwarz will join our side. She must."

Louise knew what the Emperor was thinking.

With that alone, Louise would join my side.

Because she already knew which battle would be won.

Because she knew that this wasn't even a fight in the first place.

Good and evil depended on who recorded them.

That was why the one who held the power to write history could always define something as good and something as evil.

So, the meaning of good and evil itself disappeared, and in the end, only who could hold the pen of power mattered.

So, who was the real good?

So, who was the real evil?

Talking about it would only fill the sleepless nights.

Those who held the pen in life would become the ones who wielded justice and righteousness.

Thus, surviving was the only justice and the true righteousness.

Losers would be recorded as evil.

Not because they were evil, but because they had been defeated.

"…"

Louise von Schwarz didn't have a long silence to contemplate.

The conclusion was reached, and the choice that had to be made was clear.

The question was whether she could handle it.

The situation had twisted in such a way that Louise von Schwarz had unexpectedly seen and learned things she should never have been able to see or know. This had unexpected effects in unexpected places.

Everything would belong to the Demon King.

Louise knew that.

Kernstadt, and the Holy Order.

By the time the Gate Incident was fully resolved, more than half of the allied forces would have sworn allegiance to the Demon King.

At the forefront stood Rowan, the commander of the Holy Knights.

For the heretical inquisitor, who had enforced order through evil, trampled on doctrine, and protected the order of the Church, establishing order through blood and deceit was nothing new.

Manipulation, extortion, conspiracy, intrigue, torture, brainwashing.

Such vile and filthy deeds were her lot.

Rowan stared silently at the princess of Kernstadt.

King Constantine was frail, so her decision was virtually the decision of Kernstadt.

After a moment of silence, Louise spoke up.

"I have a condition."

"A condition?"

"If you accept it, I will stand with you."

Louise didn't simply decide to join their side.

"I can convey that. What is the condition?"

"There's no need to seek the Demon King's permission. Your agreement will suffice."

“…Do I have the authority to decide?"

"Of course."

Louise's condition was simple.

"The condition is, your life."

“…What?"

Taken aback by the sudden request, Rowan furrowed her brow.

Asking for her life out of the blue.

“…I can't deny you that, but did you hate me that much?"

"I do hate you, and I do wish you were dead. But this is an entirely different matter."

"How is it different?"

Louise seemed to enjoy Rowan's perplexed face, taking a sip of her wine and smirking.

"Does the Demon King intend to rule through oppression or govern wisely?"

"I don't know the actual outcome, but I assume he would try the latter?"

"Then your life is all the more necessary."

"…?"

Louise began to laugh at Rowan's apparent inability to understand.

"Isn't it obvious?"

It was indeed, a reckless laugh.

"How could a madwoman who incited riots, encouraged massacres, and killed countless people as a heretical inquisitor help the Demon King's reign?

"…"

"Considering that there are many people who know these facts, do you think the commander's secret will be kept forever?"

"…Probably not."

"Even if you can help now, the last act of loyalty the commander can perform once the Demon King's world is complete is to stand on the scaffold of purging. No, that is precisely how the commander's loyalty will be fulfilled."

At those words, Rowan's expression hardened ominously.

Rowan's role was only for now.

Rowan had done too many things up to this point, regardless of her actual character.

Because of the sins she had committed so far, she would have to face judgment once the reign began.

When peace began, her very existence would become a burden.

Therefore, Rowan would have to die, ironically, the moment the world she wished for

arrived.

She had to die to complete her loyalty.

Rowan's death was not necessary for Louise, but rather for the Demon King.

That's why Louise offered Rowan's death as a condition, even though it had nothing to do with her personal feelings.

Using the uncertainty of the Demon King's power in the future as an excuse, she convinced both Rowan and the Demon King that Rowan had to die.

"Having lived in the shadows, an existence of darkness met chaos and wore a badge, but did you really think you could live in the light? That's impossible."

Louise looked at her with an unbearable, grim smile.

Louise von Schwarz was the princess of Kernstadt.

She was the first princess of the first vassal state, and the successor to the second-largest country in the world.

It wasn't as if she wouldn't gain anything from a losing deal.

Deception, conspiracy, and intrigue were obviously more familiar to Louise.

"New commander, the situation may change and your position may differ, but will your nature change?"

No matter how much she was the envoy of the Demon King right now.

No matter how strong her immediate power was.

Her nature would not change.

Louise was a princess and heir of a great nation.

While she had to live in the shadows.

Like a cheap drink made by lowly people with inferior ingredients, forced together

by circumstances, her ‘moonshine’ could only be repulsive.

Cheap is cheap.

"How could moss grow in the light?"

If a creature of darkness foolishly ventured into the light, it was bound to wither and die.

CHAPTER 630

"Haah…"

Rowan let out a deep sigh as she left the Kernstadt military garrison.

Royalty was indeed royalty.

Not just any ordinary royalty.

She knew they couldn't be mere chess pieces that could be moved at will, but Louise von Schwartz was beyond her expectations.

Even though she knew she had to shake an unwilling hand, she ultimately got what she wanted.

No, to be precise, she didn't even say she wanted it.

Louise didn't tell Rowan that she wanted her dead.

She said there was a 'need' for her to die – not for herself, but for the Demon King.

The reason Louise's negotiation and demands were eerie was because Rowan herself had been convinced by her words.

A dog had no use in troubled times.

Cute dogs were not needed.

All that was needed was a large, fierce dog to bite the enemy.

But once the troubled times were over, the use of hunting dogs diminished, and mad dogs must be eliminated.

It was clear that the Demon King had ambitions, and while Rowan might be needed for now, there was a possibility that her past actions could come back to haunt her once the situation stabilized.

For the sake of the Demon King's world, Rowan had to die along with all her sins the moment that world was completed.

She had to confess that her sins were unrelated to the Demon King and take her leave.

She was already a villain, and the dice would continue to roll every day, determining whether her villainy would be exposed or not.

The longer she lived, the more responsibility the Demon King would bear for condoning Rowan's sins.

"…"

Louise von Schwarz had achieved a great success.

Even if she withdrew her demands now, she had made Rowan prepared to die the moment the world she desired arrived.

The fundamentals did not change.

Noble-born royalty would remain royalty until death.

Although she might appear to be submitting miserably to the Demon King for now, once the Demon King's world began, Kernstadt would become one of the top nations in the hierarchy.

Despite the gossip that Louise von Schwarz was a traitor to humanity or a despicable person who had submitted to the Demon King, she would still live as royalty, and that would not change.

However, Rowan believed that her past actions would eventually catch up with her.

She had to disappear because her very existence was a burden to the one she served.

The fundamentals did not change.

The words spoken and the deeds committed remained unchanged.

Rowan was a creature that should never have stepped into the light.

If she hadn't, she could have continued to live in the fog and shadows.

But as a consequence of stepping into the light, she must wither and die, rather than return to the darkness.

The shadows that hid her.

The tree called the Pope.

For a creature that had lived in the shadows they created, cutting down the masters of those shadows and occupying their place was a transgression that must be punished with death.

Rowan didn't feel particularly sorrowful or sad about it.

It was just unpleasant that a spoiled royal brat had made her realize something she should have known all along.

But it made her think.

What if she hadn't lived as a heretic inquisitor?

Like the children left in the monastery, she too had been an abandoned child.

Some of these children would grow up as abandoned, then demonstrate their talent for holy power and enter the Temple.

Adriana had done so.

Or, they could catch the eye of the Holy Knight Commander and be groomed to become the next Holy Knight Commander.

Olivia Lanze had said so.

Someone who happened to have a similar talent but was raised in a monastery that trained heretic inquisitors.

So, she was raised as a heretic inquisitor.

"…"

Who defines one's origin?

Was it something I decided?

Would it have been different if I was raised differently?

In that harsh country, where the snow of the four seasons fell. In a gloomy and desolate monastery built away from people's eyes.

Not learning terrible techniques to torture, brainwash, and fabricate nonexistent crimes.

Not being educated on how to convince myself to betray my teachings even before I learned them.

Wouldn't it have been different if I had grown up in a place like a temple, not knowing how to hate others?

Olivia Lanze.

The person who had lived with the Demon King and the temple.

The position of the leader of the Holy Order and the future Holy Emperor of the next Holy Empire.

Could that position have been mine?

Originally twisted and with a dark heart, Rowan became even more entangled by the words Louise had thrown at him.

“…Nonsense."

The good thing was, Rowan only knew Louise's intention.

She clearly understood her intention not to interfere and to watch the grave.

So, thinking too much about it was just falling for Louise's malice.

The position of Olivia Lanze was Olivia Lanze's position.

There was no reason to desire it, nor to regret it.

If dying and disappearing would help the Demon King, then so be it.

Twisted loyalty is still loyalty.

And the Demon King didn't even like her.

She just had to think about what she had to do.

Louise von Schwarz had been captured.

Now, it was time for the next.

The current goal was to carefully make those with a high likelihood of capture come over, one by one.

The most important person, Louise von Schwarz, had asked for a price but had crossed over.

In fact, it wasn't even a price. It was necessary from the beginning.

Rowan didn't need to capture everyone.

'Is it the Duke next……?'

Now it was the Duke of Saint Owan's turn.

'He said there was no need for me to go there…… '

The person who should step forward to capture the Duke of Saint Owan.

Wasn't the most suitable person right next to the Demon King?

The report that had been sent from Rowan to the side of Sarkegaar arrived for me around noon the next day.

As I read the report, I couldn't help but feel a taste that was both bitter and not.

"Hmm……”

Louise von Schwarz wanted Rowan's execution.

Not right now, but after everything was resolved.

Harriet, Charlotte, and I gathered in the office and read the report together.

"It's a necessary task. Of course, it seems certain that she asked not because it was necessary, but because she wanted to see it happen."

Charlotte nodded her head as if acknowledging the intentions and necessity of Louise von Schwarz's request after reading the report.

She agreed that Rowan should be killed.

She agreed that an execution was necessary.

But, if you think about it, how many people in my group should not die?

"It's scary……”

Harriet, who was not familiar with such matters, trembled slightly at the tips of her fingers.

"Execution is a necessary task. It's not just Rowan who needs to die. If there are too many heroes, the country will be ruined."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

It was true that heroes should be treated with respect.

However, excessive respect could lead to a dispersion of power, and when it went too far, it would become the seed of division. Therefore, as a ruler, it was necessary to make a decisive choice to purge heroes after successfully completing the conquest.

It wasn't just about killing Rowan.

It was also about killing Charlotte.

"Do you understand what I'm saying?"

At my words, Charlotte shrugged her shoulders.

"If necessary, I should be killed too. No, actually, it would be better to kill me."

"What?"

It wasn't me who was surprised by Charlotte's calm words, but Harriet.

"Because if you employ me while sparing my life, my existence itself would become the seed of the Gardias royal family's revival. Logically, I should be killed."

Yes, I wasn't unaware of that.

"Would I do that?"

"That's why I'm worried. Because you absolutely won't."

"How many times have I saved your life by now? If I have to kill you later, I'll bite my tongue and die first."

It sounded absurd.

Countless times, I had tried to save Charlotte.

But now, after everything had finally stabilized and I wanted to strengthen the foundations of the nation, would I just hang her out to dry?

I would rather die than live to see such a thing.

I understood that such a decision was necessary for a ruler, but if that was the life of a ruler, I would rather not live as one.

That didn't mean I didn't acknowledge the necessity of a purge.

A purge was necessary.

But if so, who should be purged and to what extent?

Even though I didn't plan on it, I would have to sift through the heroes who had been with me since before we arrived in Edina.

If necessary, even Olivia and Liana would have to be killed.

I absolutely couldn't carry out such a purge, and this report was written by Rowan herself.

It wasn't just about Louise von Schwarz's demands.

Rowan had written in detail about why she should die.

She was prepared to die at any moment.

"I really dislike this guy. It's too burdensome."

It was overwhelmingly burdensome.

"I don't know. Purges and all that stuff aren't problems to think about right now. Just promise to do it. We can change our minds later."

After all, even if Louise received a promise for a purge, she would only collect the price later.

We could say that we couldn't do it later on.

When the situation actually came to that, we could think differently based on the necessity at that time.

But ultimately, it was about promising to give in to everything she wanted for now since we could just back out later.

"What should I say… it's a bit… difficult."

Harriet couldn't help but have a troubled expression.

"People in these positions usually have to lie a lot, you know?"

"That's true."

"And if the situation unfolds according to our wishes, do you think Louise could turn against us for not keeping our promise? She absolutely can't."

"Right, right. Of course."

As Charlotte and I bickered in agreement, Harriet scowled at us as if we were both trash.

We decided to go ahead with the purge.

Whether or not we would actually kill Rowan would be determined later.

It was a garbage-like logic, but Louise probably knew that my guarantee wasn't very reliable.

A purge.

I was already worrying about something that wasn't an issue at this stage.

Let's focus on the task at hand.

Charlotte seemed to have sorted herself out and stretched.

"Now it's time for the next step."

Louise von Schwarz agreed to join our side, with the condition that the payment would come later.

The Holy Knights, the Five Great Churches, and Kernstadt.

Next.

The Saint Owan Duchy.

And the leader of the duchy, the Archduke of Saint Owan.

"I'll do my best."

With a determined expression, Harriet nodded.

Look at her.

How adorable.

"What exactly are you going to do well?"

"Uh? That would be… persuading…?"

Harriet seemed to think it was obvious that she should go to persuade the Archduke of Saint Owan.

"Why would you go? I'm the one going."

"Huh?"

"What are you talking about? Why are you going in person?"

Charlotte seemed just as confused.

"Honestly, I don't think it's a bad idea for you to go either. But don't you think you should consider the feelings of a parent?"

"Um?"

"Ah…"

"If you go and ask for help, it might be easier to say, but the Archduke might think… won't I look despicable?"

Although not a hostage, the daughter's happiness might depend on following my words.

If I were a parent, I would find it very despicable.

I should visit in person.

"Even if the Archduke understands your actions, I'm ultimately the scumbag who stole his daughter, right? He may understand you, but understanding me is a completely different matter."

“…Huh?"

"That's why this time, I should go and bow my head."

"Is, is that so?"

"Certainly, it would be fortunate if he didn’t slap Reinhardt as soon as he saw him. No, Reinhardt should be slapped at least once as a courtesy. It seems that way."

Harriet appeared puzzled, and Charlotte seemed to agree with my decision.

That's right, as Charlotte said.

I should have been slapped at least once. I was despicable. I didn't even go to get slapped until now.

But then.

What should I say?

Let's say I get slapped. What should I do next?

Father-in-law, please.

You’ve already taken my daughter, you bastard!

Not the daughter. I've already taken your daughter.

Then what! What else do you want, you brat!

Father-in-law.

Don’t call me father-in-law.

Do I have to say that… is that the situation?

The Archduke could use teleportation.

So, there was no need to meet at the Allied Forces' base.

If the Archduke wanted, we could meet in the Saint Owan Duchy, and if he wanted to meet at the Allied Forces' base, that would be fine too.

Unlike Louise, the Archduke wouldn't refuse a proposal to meet and talk since his daughter was with me.

"What if… my father… tries to kill you…?"

Harriet's eyes were brimming with tears.

Harriet had actually visited Saint Owan Duchy once before to meet the Archduke. At that time, the Archduke said he understood Harriet.

But that was one thing, and wouldn't it be natural for the Archduke to have the urge to crush me?

"I think it's best if I go with you."

“…No, that would be even weirder."

It would really look like we're going to ask for permission to get married!

CHAPTER 631

Capturing the Archduke of Saint Owan held a qualitatively different significance than taking over Kernstadt.

Kernstadt was about securing 'scale' in terms of overall power.

However, the Archduke was the person in charge of the Titan, which was one of the main pillars of the allied forces' strength.

Of course, the Archduke couldn't operate the Titan on his own when it came to the finer details, but the Titan held immense power within the allied forces.

It was strong enough to turn the tide of a battle in a major city within just seven minutes.

Although the Immortals currently possessed tremendous might, the Titan was not far behind and was being continuously improved in real-time.

Having the Archduke on my side didn't mean I could possess the Titan.

It meant that I could neutralize them.

Just as I hoped that the Immortals wouldn't be used in such a situation, the Titan should never be used in a manner other than fighting against monsters.

As long as I pursued this direction, I had to thoroughly neutralize both the allied forces and the empire.

Capturing Kernstadt had already weakened the allied forces by about half, and by neutralizing the Titan, I could render one of the main pillars of their strength unusable.

No matter how I met him, I would go to the meeting with the Archduke alone.

Sarkegaar would make contact with the Archduke first, and I would be the one to speak with him.

I left the decision of where to meet up to the Archduke.

We could meet in the capital city of Arnaca in the Saint Owan Duchy, but that might be very uncomfortable for him.

I didn't want to appear threatening to the Archduke in any way. That's why I chose to go myself instead of sending Harriet.

The allied forces had already left Grenosia and started their retreat. There wasn't any battle in Grenosia, anyway.

Sarkegaar, who had returned to Lazak with Lucinil, returned sooner than I had expected.

"What's going on? Why did you come with the Lucinil instead of Harriet?"

Harriet, who was in charge of transportation, usually brought people back from designated locations quickly.

But why did Lucinil come instead of Harriet?

"I don't know. The scribe wanted to take him, but he insisted on going with me."

"Really?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

Did Sarkegaar have a preference for people?

He disliked humans in general, but I didn't recall him specifically disliking Harriet. Why now?

"Anyway, did you decide on a place?"

“…We haven't had a chance to meet with the Archduke yet."

What's going on? Why did you come back if you haven't finished the task?

I had grown accustomed to his sinister and gloomy expressions.

But this expression of Sarkegaar's was new to me.

There was something strange about both sending Harriet back and bringing Lucinil along.

"That… It might not be very important, but I thought Your Highness should know… I didn't want to involve the scribe for a reason…"

It was a rare sight to see Sarkegaar flustered and rambling.

"…Why are you suddenly like this? What's going on?"

Sarkegaar hesitated uncharacteristically, and even Lucinil tilted her head as if something was odd.

Did something happen?

Did something not go well?

"Actually… The person who developed the Titan… Your Highness's classmate…"

"Adelia? What about her?"

What on earth was he trying to say?

Adelia did what now?

"That girl… seems to have… hmm…"

"…?"

Is this what I'm thinking?

"No way."

Lucinil also opened her mouth wide and started to tremble.

"Adelia is… likely to have… fallen for the Archduke of Saint Owan…"

This was completely out of the blue, extremely bizarre, not particularly meaningful,

and had no impact on the overall situation.

"What a crazy…”

A massive, insane accident had occurred.

No, it had already occurred.

But wait.

Wasn't this?

"The Archduke… The Archduke is?"

The Archduke isn't, right?

Then, it's true.

Big trouble!

What about our blockhead!

What about me!

"The Archduke… of course, wouldn't be that kind of person…”

I'd had several near-death experiences before.

But this was the first time I felt like I had actually died and come back to life.

Sarkegaar was waiting for a moment when the Archduke was alone, lurking in various forms nearby.

"He never seems to be alone."

"The Archduke is busy… it makes sense when you think about it."

He was a public figure who couldn't help but fail in his endeavors.

Louise von Schwarz was quite busy as well. However, the Archduke was both a commander and the head of research.

Although the scale wasn't comparable to Kernstadt's army, the Archduke probably didn't have any proper downtime.

That's why it was extremely difficult to make contact with him when he was alone.

Sarkegaar's failure to make contact with the Archduke as per my instructions was not without reason.

But right now, that wasn't important.

Sarkegaar was visibly flustered by the situation, and Lucinil listened to the story with a bewitched expression.

"It seems… the Archduke often sleeps in the research quarters rather than his own quarters. There are other researchers there, but… Adelia is also almost always present."

Titan was a war weapon created by combining the ancient golem technology of the Saint Owan Empire and Adelia's genius for magicrafting.

In other words, the Archduke was the head of the laboratory, and Adelia was the chief researcher.

So, they would inevitably see each other's faces all the time, every day, every hour.

Still.

I was still thinking about the slightest possibility.

That it was a misunderstanding or a mistake on Sarkegaar's part.

It had to be.

It absolutely had to be!

It's too confusing!

"When the Archduke skips a meal, Adelia seems to bring him food, and when he falls asleep, she covers him with a blanket… those kinds of things seem quite…"

"Seems like it's reversed somehow…"

Lucinil murmured with an uneasy expression at Sarkegaar's explanation.

That's true.

It should be a heartwarming scene of a daughter's friend following him to the battlefield to develop war weapons, the daughter's image overlapping with her, and the Archduke covering the daughter with a blanket when she falls asleep in the lab…

It's the complete opposite!

"Well, isn't that… possible?"

But honestly, isn't it not that strange?

Covering with a blanket, bringing bread when one seems to be starving.

You can do that. It doesn't have to be because Adelia has those feelings. It could be because she respects the Archduke or pities him.

But…

What about that?

Feeling pity and compassion, I constantly found myself paying attention to them, wanting to take care of their needs. Before I knew it, I was only looking at that person…

That…

Surprisingly, it was a plausible possibility.

However, Sarkegaar responded with a very troubled expression to my assertion that it could happen.

"It might be possible, but…"

"Yes, that's just how Adelia is. She can't bear to say harsh words, and when she thinks someone is kind but troubled, she can't help but worry about them. I'm not sure if that's really the case, but she's kind-hearted. Right…”

"So you're saying she has a similar way of thinking as you, but her personality is more upright?"

"Your Highness, I'm not in the mood for banter right now."

"Ah, my apologies. It's just that I always seem to choose the worst things to say, and it's not helping the situation…”

"Enough! Silver-haired brat, leave!"

"What? Did you just call me a brat?"

"Silver-haired granny, leave!"

"You!"

Sarkegaar watched Lucinil and me bickering with a mature expression.

It was an expression that said we were truly pathetic.

Anyway, let's get back to the main topic.

"So… are you sure about this?"

There was no evidence!

If merely providing blankets and meals was an indication of affection, then the world would be filled with baseless confessions!

"It's not evidence, but… I am certain."

"How can you be certain without evidence?"

"The way she looks at him…”

At those words, I felt my breath catch in my throat.

The way Adelia looked at the Archduke.

Her expression.

That…

It didn't seem like evidence at all, but in truth, there was no better proof.

In fact, it was such a lack of evidence that it made me wonder what other evidence there could be.

"Damn it."

So that's what it was…

The kidnapped graduate student, who had been living in the professor's lab, began to see the professor as a man after only looking at him…

One cannot imagine what they have never experienced.

The Archduke is a modest person. Therefore, he would not be able to imagine that Adelia might like him. So, whether or not Adelia had such feelings, the Archduke would be completely oblivious. He would not even have considered the possibility in the first place.

In the end, Sarkegaar finished his brief report and returned to the allied forces.

When the opportunity arose to connect with the Archduke, he would deliver my message. The fact that Sarkegaar discovered this while seeking the opportunity was not a significant issue.

Even if Adelia harbored… such feelings toward the Archduke, it wouldn't cause any major problems.

The Archduke's children are all well and healthy. His missing daughter is safe and sound now.

It doesn't affect the overall situation, and strictly speaking, it's not a big deal.

Frankly, what does it matter if the Archduke and Adelia were having some bizarre, embarrassing affair? The important thing is the war, not romance.

I should have remained ignorant!

Knowing it only makes me feel like I'm going insane over a problem I can't solve, and it has nothing to do with the overall situation!

—---

"Have you decided when to leave?"

"Not yet…”

"Really? Then why did Sarkegaar come by earlier? He seemed to have an odd expression. Is anything wrong?"

"It's not that…”

"Also, when I was trying to take him there, he asked me to call you. Did I do something wrong to him?"

"No, no, you did nothing wrong. Absolutely nothing wrong."

Our blockhead did nothing wrong!

"Then who is at fault? What's going on?"

"No! Nobody, uh, nobody did anything wrong."

So, was it Adelia's fault?

No way.

There's nothing wrong with liking someone…

It's not like something bad happened!

“…What's going on? It seems like something's up."

"No, nothing. There's no problem…”

Obviously, Harriet suspected there was an issue.

As Harriet innocently asked various questions, I felt like my tongue would go numb.

Harriet and Adelia became friends when they met at the temple.

Upon hearing the news that Adelia had developed Titan with the Archduke, Harriet seemed delighted by her friend's historic achievement.

Your dear friend has fallen for your father…

How am I supposed to tell her this!

Several maddening days passed.

The Allied Forces left Grenosia and set off, and of course, the Archduke had some time during the march.

The report from Sarkegaar.

I made contact with the Archduke safely, and the meeting place he proposed was the capital of Saint Owan Duchy, Arnaca.

The White Palace of Arnaca, Arunaria.

Meeting at the Allied Forces' garrison was risky. Moreover, the Archduke could travel anywhere from the start.

So, he seemed to prefer meeting in his own territory.

"…”

Actually, I should be extremely nervous.

I didn't know what the Archduke really thought of me, and I had no excuse if he became angry about how I handled Harriet as I pleased.

But, after realizing something strange…

The problem was that it became a completely different kind of tension.

Anyway, the task was set.

Meet the Archduke.

And trap him.

That was all I had to do.

I didn't know anything else.

Neither Harriet nor the Archduke knew.

I hated making things more confusing by saying unnecessary things!

Saint Owan Kingdom's capital, Arnaca.

I had been to Arnaca twice.

During my time at the temple, I went there because of Adriana's sudden withdrawal. The monastery where Adriana grew up was in Saint Owan Duchy.

Back then, I knocked on the gates of the duchy's palace to obtain priority to use the warp gate.

Thinking about it, I must have been quite insane.

At that time, I met the entire Saint Owan royal family. I had met the Archduke once before.

He and Harriet almost thought they were going to get married.

The second time was after the gate incident when I came with Harriet. I didn't enter Arunaria, only Harriet did.

And now, for the third time.

The fortified magic towers of Arunaria were still impressive.

People's expressions were still gloomy. They must have thought that once the war ended, the empire would retaliate.

Would they consider it a relief that the Saint Owan Duchy sided with the Demon King, or would they say they knew the Archduke would betray them after all?

I couldn't tell what decision the Archduke would make.

If the Archduke sided with me, the misunderstanding of the world would eventually become true.

There was no way to make any excuses.

He would have to endure the criticism that his family had conspired with the Demon King for a very long time, ever since his daughter followed him. It wasn't true, but there was no way to clear their name.

I wondered what the Archduke would think when the false accusations became accepted as fact.

It was not Harriet who brought me to Arnaca, but rather Eleris.

I didn't want to come here with Harriet for no reason. And I found out about something rather absurd.

I walked through the desolate streets of Arnaca towards the massive palace at its center, the White Palace of Arunaria.

It was a towering palace, seemingly carved out of a colossal mountain.

The palace was still beautiful.

As I gazed upon the palace's towering spires, various thoughts crossed my mind.

In her childhood, Harriet had told me that she used to climb those tall spires to watch the children playing in the streets below.

Imagining a young Harriet, watching the children play from atop those lonely spires, it seemed somehow pitiful and cute.

With those thoughts, I arrived at the square where the entrance to Arunaria came into view.

"Your Highness, be careful."

"Nothing will happen, but I should be cautious."

Naturally, I was the only one entering. There was no need to involve anyone else and make the Archduke anxious.

Eleris sternly warned me to be prepared for any situation.

At the entrance to Arunaria, human-shaped golems guarded the gate.

Human-shaped golems.

It was eerily similar to the real human-made golems, and I couldn't help but feel a chill.

"State your business."

"Speak."

The same question as when I first visited Arunaria.

"I am Reinhardt."

Only a name was needed to enter.

"I bear a message for His Grace the Archduke."

The golems gave the same response as before.

"Enter."

However.

"Demon King."

They addressed me as the Demon King, even though I introduced myself as Reinhardt.

-Grumble Grumble

The grand gates of the palace began to open, revealing the tall, white stone steps leading up to Arunaria.

There was no need to go all the way to the palace.

At about the midpoint of the ascending staircase.

Archduke Saint Owan looked down at me from there.

The Archduke held a staff in his hand.

Naturally, it was not a walking stick used for a disabled leg.

It was likely the Archduke's weapon.

The Archduke, dressed in a suit, silently stared down at me.

It was different from the typical robe-wearing mages.

The Archduke exuded a dignified and aristocratic aura, a prime example of a noble mage.

To be honest, I was intimidated.

Had I come to a place I shouldn't have?

Should I have just let Harriet go instead?

Had I foolishly insisted on doing this myself and ended up in a mess?

"Uh… Well…”

I had to take the submissive approach.

Fighting the Archduke would ruin my life!

I had no confidence in handling that!

"May I come up…?"

When I encountered the Archduke during the temple days, he seemed like nothing more than a doting father.

However, now that the war continued, the Archduke had returned to his true self.

A mage who rightfully deserved the title of the world's strongest.

Raphael de Saint Owan.

The Archduke looked down at me and spoke.

"Come up."

Honestly.

In many ways.

I was scared of the Archduke.

CHAPTER 632

Originally a tranquil palace, the White Palace of Arunaria was now even more silent.

A stillness far from gloom.

Silence often invoked a certain degree of fear, but the stillness in Arunaria was closer to solemnity.

As the Archduke had said, it was a lonely place, and that loneliness persisted.

The Archduke had accompanied me as I climbed the stairs, reaching a spot where Arunaria was visible in the distance.

The Archduke said nothing.

He merely walked a little ahead, and I followed quietly, wondering if he had anything to say.

I somehow felt like I was being punished.

To be honest, I was in a position where I had to be cautious.

Having no words to say, I had come here to ask the Archduke to take my side.

If my insolence had gone this far, wouldn't I have to understand if the Archduke wanted to strike me down?

The Archduke had suffered tremendous damage because of my existence.

His reputation had hit rock bottom because his daughter had disappeared with the Demon King. The people of the duchy were hated, and they were treated coldly by the allied forces.

The long-established and honorable Saint Owan family's reputation had been thrown into a gutter in an instant.

What is honor?

For most people, it might not mean much, but for someone like the Archduke of Saint Owan, it must have been very important.

And it had all evaporated because of my existence.

The Archduke remained silent for a long time, and I couldn't help but think about such things as I continued to gaze at the palace.

Were they all doing well?

Harriet's mother and her brothers.

I knew that all of her brothers were mages and were serving in the allied forces. And I knew they were safe.

But being safe and doing well were worlds apart.

I didn't even have the right to ask if they were all well, so I couldn't say a word.

For over an hour.

The Archduke said nothing, and I was as mute as if I'd eaten honey.

It wasn't just the feeling of being punished; it was clear that I was actually being punished.

At the end of that long, drawn-out silence.

"How strange."

The Archduke suddenly said that.

Strange?

The Archduke stared at me intently.

"You seem to be quite restless."

In fact, I was.

Wouldn't it be even stranger to be confident in this situation?

Am I supposed to stand tall and be forthright?

"Well, I… I…"

"…"

I wanted to say something, but my lips wouldn't part.

I had nothing to say to the Archduke, of all people.

He must know that I didn't kidnap Harriet and that she followed me of her own accord. But what would that mean? Hiding secrets and becoming close with his daughter was already a despicable act.

The Archduke looked at me.

"Do you think you've wronged me?"

No.

If this isn't wrong, then what is it?

"…Yes."

I had no idea what the Archduke was thinking.

"Hmm…"

After some contemplation, the Archduke slowly nodded.

"Well then, tell me."

Was he asking me to be honest?

"What do you think you've done wrong so far?"

Leaning on his cane,

The Archduke stood before me like a judge and calmly spoke.

"Whether it's what you've done to me."

"Or what you've done to my daughter."

"Or, for example…"

"To the world."

"To humanity."

"If you think you've done wrong, then what is it?"

The person who had never once dabbled in evil power or cunning.

The one who had pursued the righteous path with righteous power, living for noble and just causes.

The person who had done nothing wrong, but because of me, lost far too much.

Yet, without ever expressing a hint of sorrow or resentment, he carried out his duties and continued to do so.

Archduke Saint Owan.

"Speak about that."

He was perhaps the only person with the right to judge me.

It was a long story.

But ultimately, it was a story that culminated in an attempt to save everyone, leading to the current situation.

What was Akasha, who was Cantus Magna, why the Tomb of the Lich was created,

and what was the original purpose for using Akasha.

By the time everything was revealed, it was already too late.

For too long, I had lied, and no one could trust me. The ones who felt the greatest betrayal couldn't help but hate me.

The story of trying to change the future but instead fulfilling it.

The story that if nothing had been done, nothing would have happened.

"It seems you've received a curse from the gods, not their blessing."

The Duke, having heard the entire story, spoke simply.

Were the two divine relics I possessed not a blessing, but a curse?

"Rather, it's humanity that has received the curse."

But, as if reading my thoughts, the Duke corrected himself.

A curse on humanity?

"If the Demon King had no intention of harming humanity and intended to use Akasha to escape to another world, there would have been no reason to fight."

Valier wanted not war but escape.

Humanity, fearing the threat of demons, invaded Darkland, slaughtering not only the Demon King but most of the demons as well.

They did not try to understand; they were afraid.

It all happened because of a misunderstanding.

"Isn't it that humanity is on the brink of destruction because of the misunderstanding that led to the annihilation of its neighbors?"

The Gate Incident, too, occurred ultimately due to misunderstanding and miscommunication.

"Whether or not you wanted revenge, the truth that the Demon King has taken the most decisive and certain revenge on humanity does not change."

In the end, it was both revenge and not revenge, and I couldn't deny that.

I played the biggest role in the extinction of humanity.

That truth would never change.

"How can this be anything other than the curse of the gods?"

Receiving back what was given, through misunderstanding.

The Duke seemed to think that this was the judgment and curse of the gods upon humanity.

Was this disaster a curse of the gods?

The Duke looked up at the gloomy sky.

"Of course, whether this is truly the curse of the gods or a horrible coincidence, we cannot know."

How could one possibly calculate the probability if it were just a terrible coincidence?

"But even if this is the curse of the gods, your guilt does not disappear, and it doesn't mean you're guiltless. In the end, the fact that all of this originated from you remains unchanged."

Yes.

I don't even want to say that I did nothing wrong.

Guilt and responsibility do not disappear.

The Gate Incident happened in order to save me.

Antirianus had impulsively charged, Sarkegaar had argued fiercely, and Eleris had activated Akasha.

That, too, was an undeniable truth.

"However, isn't it too cruel to say that you should have rather died?"

"…"

"When I regained consciousness, having lost all my memories, I found that my kingdom had been destroyed, my father, who was once the absolute ruler and king of a world, had perished alongside the hero, and I was left with nothing but an empty title, unable to be anything more than a mark of shame. The only thing I knew was that the world would soon be destroyed…"

"…"

"You've come so far, haven't you? No, how you even managed to come this far… isn't it miraculous?"

The fact that I was the last Archdemon of the destroyed Demon Realm was an extremely unfavorable condition for my survival.

It would have been better if I were just some random human, a nobody.

Yet, in the end, I managed to reach the brink of destroying the world, I reconstructed Darkland, and now humans live there alongside us.

Countless coincidences saved me, and countless coincidences led me to this point.

But in the end, I became the king of the rebuilt Demon Realm.

How did I do it?

The Duke found it strange, and as I traced back my steps from the beginning, I couldn't help but wonder how any of it was possible.

If someone had hinted at the beginning that I would end up like this in a few years, I wouldn't have believed them either.

"You may not be the most powerful Demon King in history, but you will be the most extraordinary."

So that's how it would be.

The reconstruction of a destroyed kingdom.

I had accomplished the reconstruction of Darkland.

That's why I could call myself a Demon King, not just Reinhardt, and face the Duke.

And then, destruction.

I succeeded in taking revenge on humanity.

I didn't achieve everything I set out to do.

But, the things that a Demon King should do were all successfully completed.

"Now you stand on the brink of annihilating humanity and ruling the entire world. You'll be the most extraordinary and perfect Demon King in history."

And then, becoming the ruler of the world.

"Isn't it ironic that you, who never wanted to be a Demon King, have become the closest being to fulfilling the demons' long-held wish that no one has ever achieved?"

I never wanted to be a Demon King.

I didn't want to be anything like a king.

"It seems that Archdemons are cursed to never live the lives they want."

Yes.

If Archdemons are a race cursed like that.

I didn't want to rebuild Darkland, but I did.

I didn't wish for humanity's destruction, but humanity was destroyed.

Perhaps, in the lineage of Archdemons, I was the only Demon King who didn't want to become one and didn't harbor hatred for humans.

That's why I destroyed all of humanity, rebuilt the ruined kingdom, and now have the opportunity to own the entire world.

Is there really such a curse?

Is that why Demon Kings have been failing?

"Then, we're in big trouble."

"Big trouble, you say?"

If there is such a curse, it's a big problem.

"The Gate Incident won't end."

If Archdemons have such a curse, the Gate Incident won't end.

Then this, too, would become yet another farce.

I shuddered at the thought.

"Ha-ha… I suppose so."

The archduke laughed weakly at my words.

Whether such a curse existed or not was unknown.

What mattered was that the archduke seemed to understand how desperately I wanted to put an end to the Gate incident.

"So in the end, you're saying it's all your fault?"

The archduke asked me to point out any wrongdoings.

So I told him about everything that had happened up until now.

"That… Hurting Harriet… that was my fault as well…"

Even though she had chosen to follow me, it was ultimately a wrong I had committed against the archduke.

"I didn't contact you all this time… You must have been worried. Anyway… it's all my fault. The state of the world, everything…"

"The state of the world?"

"Yes."

"Why would that be your fault?"

The archduke looked at me.

"You said it yourself. The state of the world resulted from my actions. So it's my fault…"

"It could be your sin, but why would it be a mistake?"

Is there a difference between sin and mistake?

I couldn't quite grasp what the archduke was trying to say.

"Let's say you really caused the Gate incident with the intention of destroying humanity. Let's assume that."

The archduke spoke softly, tapping his staff on the marble steps.

"Even so, wouldn't that be acceptable?"

"…What?"

What was he talking about?

"Darkland never considered waging war against humanity, but humans invaded the demon realm, destroyed your kingdom, killed your father, and even turned people you considered family into slaves."

Ah.

"If, after suffering all that, you sought to destroy humanity, who could say that your feelings and actions were unjust or mistaken?"

Many people had died.

If I had truly wanted it and caused it to happen, it would be a sin.

But it wouldn't be unjust.

The archduke was talking about revenge.

Killings and massacres driven by vengeance can't be justified, and thus are sins.

However, the feelings of revenge can be justified.

There might be sin.

But it could be permissible.

You had the right to do so.

That was what the archduke was saying.

I was allowed to do so.

Therefore, although there might be sin, there was no mistake, according to the archduke.

From the beginning, the archduke had asked me to point out any mistakes I thought I had made.

The archduke had never said I had made a mistake.

"The mistake was what I did to you."

“…What?"

"If the war in the demon realm was fundamentally wrong from the start, then the mistake lies with me, who wronged you first."

The archduke had participated in the war in the demon realm.

So if the war was fundamentally flawed from the start, and the result was the destruction of Darkland,

the one who committed the unforgivable sin was not me, but the archduke.

"Even if it were a just war, for the heir of a ruined country to seek revenge against all who participated in the war in the demon realm would be, in a way, a natural course of action."

"…"

From the moment I found out I was a demon king.

The archduke had believed that everything I did to humanity, while sinful, was justifiable.

Since I had the right to take revenge on all humans, he had accepted everything I did.

In a strict sense, the archduke was one of my enemies.

As the archmage, the archduke had undoubtedly achieved tremendous accomplishments in the war against the demon realm, which inevitably meant that he had killed numerous demons.

If I were truly Valier, the archduke would have been one of the people with the highest positions on my list of those responsible for the massacre.

"Why have you come to your enemy's dwelling with the expression of a sinner, seeking to apologize?"

Although he had worn the mask of a human in the past, there had been no change in his demeanor even in situations where it was only natural to remove the mask, now that it was known I was the demon king.

"I… I don't understand."

The archduke seemed unable to comprehend my arrival at his place with the attitude of a sinner, watching his every move.

"I see…"

The archduke looked up at the sky.

Beyond not possessing the vengeful feelings I should have had, I was only thinking about what I had done wrong to the archduke, without even a single grain of hatred.

"My daughter was right."

The archduke spoke in a voice laden with deep guilt.

"You may be sinful, but you did nothing wrong."

The archduke muttered blankly.

"I have both sinned and made mistakes."

Once he learned the truth about the war in the demon realm and the truth about the previous demon king Valier, the war had been nothing more than a massacre.

Humanity hadn't achieved salvation through the extermination of the demons.

Instead, they had brought about the Gate incident as a consequence.

It wasn't just me who should have remained still.

From the beginning, it was an issue where humanity should have remained still.

I wasn't Valier.

Therefore, I couldn't have any feelings of revenge towards the archduke.

The archduke was simply misunderstanding.

The fact that everything ultimately stemmed from me wasn't solely because I was the cause of the Gate incident.

This injustice had been created by my hand from the very beginning.

Thus, there was no room for feelings of vengeance or resentment, only deepening

guilt.

Just as the archduke felt guilty towards me,

I, too, could only feel guilt.

CHAPTER 633

As the Archduke had said, I was a strange existence without a sense of vengeance.

There were plenty of people who hated me, blaming the Demon King for all their troubles.

However, some believed that if I were the prince of the demon world that had been destroyed by humans, it was only natural for me to harbor such feelings.

The right to destroy humanity.

If not me, then who else could possibly have that right?

It would be stranger if I didn't want that.

That's why people thought I naturally desired humanity's destruction due to my perfect and overflowing motivation.

But it was unexpected.

The Archduke was prepared for death.

"Even if you kill me, please spare my daughter," he had intended to say.

It wasn't anger towards the thief who had taken his daughter that caused the Archduke's grim expression.

He had been prepared for death.

The Archduke was my enemy.

He had someone who should rightfully try to kill him, yet that person also held his precious daughter.

Therefore, he thought he would have to give up his life if it were demanded of him.

Having learned that even the Great Demon War was unjust, the Archduke had come to feel guilty towards me.

"If I were to do such a thing, how could I face her in the future?"

"Is that so?"

The Archduke nodded with a faint smile.

It was a bizarre situation.

The Archduke must have been constantly thinking about a problem I had never considered.

Harriet had followed me.

The Archduke must have wondered if I was using Harriet or if I truly cherished her.

If I cherished her, did I also value the daughter of my enemy?

What would I think of that enemy?

He must have been contemplating that all along.

That's why he thought I would finally come to the point of requesting contact.

Would he have to make a miserable choice, trading his life for his daughter's safety?

But in reality, I had come with the face of a thief who had taken his daughter, nervously glancing around.

That's right.

From the Archduke's perspective, he was prepared to die when he met me.

Yet the person who should have rightfully killed him was trembling with a face that seemed deserving of death.

It must have been a bizarre feeling.

Soon.

The silence that had lasted for over an hour was due to the fact that the Archduke and I had nothing to say to each other.

Both of us felt guilty towards each other.

So, the Archduke was astonished when he realized I didn't harbor the slightest bit of vengeance.

"It's quite strange; it's as if you don't even have a sense of identity as the Demon King."

That's true.

Even from the perspective that a Demon King should at least have some desire for vengeance, it was strange that I didn't even have that much.

"In fact, it's not much different. I have no memory of my time as the prince of the demon world, and it's more accurate to say I was born anew on the day the Great Demon War ended."

"And the fact that you knew the future as well."

"It's a matter that has lost its meaning now."

There was no need to mention that I was the Creator.

They wouldn't believe it anyway.

"Right…"

As if to say that he wouldn't try to understand what he couldn't, the Archduke slumped onto the bench.

I wondered if he was feeling as though ten years had passed.

Honestly, I had not come to this place with a light heart either, but the Archduke had decided to meet me with a much heavier heart than mine.

More than I had imagined, the leaders of humanity had no choice but to fear me.

At the same time, they realized that they had no choice but to acknowledge the legitimacy of my desire for revenge.

I realized that my actions, which were not to annihilate humanity but to subjugate them, could be seen as a form of forgiveness by the leaders in some sense.

Could this be considered good news?

Revenge was not within my realm of imagination, so I couldn't even consider it. Instead, those who feared the Demon King, not me, justified, interpreted, and rationalized my actions.

I was fine with that.

The one who had the right to annihilate humanity chose to forgive and rule them.

Some might tremble under that oppression, but others might be grateful for the Demon King's mercy and magnanimity.

Just like the attitude the Archduke was showing now.

“…I think I know what you want."

The Archduke knew what I was going to say even without me saying it.

"Do you need my power?"

The Archduke's knowledge.

The Archduke's authority.

And the Archduke's territory.

There, the citizens.

"Yes."

In other words, everything of Saint Owan Duchy.

"All right…"

The Archduke nodded.

"If it can be even a small atonement for all the sins I've committed against you and the demon race, I suppose I should do it."

"People's finger-pointing will become worse."

"That doesn't matter at all."

The Archduke faintly smiled.

"There is a code of conduct for beings, and I simply follow that code."

The Archduke, who thought he was sinless, had become a sinner.

"I thought I was following that code, but in the end, all those thoughts were nothing but arrogance."

The person who always thought they should go the right way, and who believed they had come the right way, eventually realized they had come down the wrong path.

In the end, the Archduke admitted his arrogance.

"Then, I should do what I can now."

He acknowledged that his belief that he could discern the right path was overconfidence.

"From now on, my power is yours."

No one is always right.

Everyone is like that.

The Archduke was one of those people.

Saint Owan Duchy decided to stand by my side.

It was completely different from what I had thought.

I was worried about what would happen if the Archduke tried to kill me.

The Archduke believed he had to cooperate with me because of the sins he had committed.

The process was different from what I had imagined, but I achieved the desired result.

"It would be nice to have a meal before leaving, but I guess it's not ready yet."

"Ah… yes."

He was probably talking about a different kind of preparation, not the meal.

Had the Archduke told his wife that he was prepared to die?

Whether he had told her or not, if I met the Archduke's wife now, she might have a heart attack.

She had seen Harriet safe with her own eyes, but the Archduke's wife would also be afraid of me, just like the Archduke.

"I'll explain it. When you come again later, we can meet like before."

I would be able to see the Archduke's wife after he had explained everything to her.

Just like before.

When I first came to Arunaria, I couldn't help but feel a sense of nostalgia as I thought about how the Archduchess and Harriet's brothers had treated me back then.

At that time, it was incredibly burdensome.

Could we go back to the way it was before?

The Archduke's words somehow made my heart ache.

We could go back to the way it was before.

Yes, we could do that.

Even if there were things that couldn't be undone.

Surely, what could be undone would be undone.

"By the way, you must have found something of your own. Is there a place in this land where that is possible?"

"There is. It's not huge, but…"

It was either surprising or impressive that there was still a safe place to plant a flag in this harsh land. The Archduke slowly nodded his head.

The Archduke should be fine.

He's not an outsider anymore.

No, he never really was to begin with.

"If you wish, you can visit the place."

Upon hearing this, the Archduke's eyes widened.

"…Really?"

He was clearly excited about the idea of seeing where his daughter had been living with his own eyes.

I was the ruler.

If I wanted to do that, I would do it. What's the problem?

However, I recalled the words of the Duchess I had heard a short while ago.

What would you do if you let a wolf in without knowing whether it's a wolf or a

sheep?

The Archduke wasn't just anyone.

But exposing Edina to many people would be dangerous.

Even now, Rowan had never been to Edina.

"I'm sorry, but I think this is not something I can decide on my own…"

It felt somewhat terrible to disappoint him after raising his expectations, but it didn't seem like a matter I could decide on my own.

"Anyway, Harriet can visit here from time to time… That's possible…"

"Yes, I understand what you're saying. Perhaps it's better for me not to know. I understand."

The Archduke seemed to understand why I was being cautious and nodded his head, as if to say there was no need to apologize.

And it seemed that he was already satisfied with the fact that I didn't make decisions about my world alone.

Oh, seriously.

No wonder Adelia went crazy.

That's right.

Due to the heavier and more serious atmosphere than I had expected, I only just remembered it.

Adelia.

The issue with Adelia stuck in my head and wouldn't leave.

"…Didn't you say it was okay? There's no need to apologize."

"No… That's not it. Thank you for understanding."

The Archduke had misunderstood.

What should I do?

I already knew that the Archduke of Saint Owan was a doting father, but I also knew that he was a proper noble and a good person.

I wasn't going to say anything.

But I couldn't help it.

Did the Archduke really not know?

Should I at least give him a hint?

"Anyway, about the Titan."

The Archduke crossed his arms at my words.

"Whatever you do in the future, I can fully cooperate, but giving you the power of the Titan is impossible."

No, that wasn't what I was talking about.

But I would have to discuss the use of the Titan eventually.

"As you and I both know, the operation of the Titan is a magical weapon that must be jointly operated by Adelia, who was once your classmate. I cannot operate the Titan on my own because the device called Master Orb requires both of us."

I knew that already.

However, the conversation naturally led to the topic of Adelia.

"And if you plan to use the Titan in a war…"

It was evident that the thought of immense damage crossed his mind. Of course, as a duke, he would have no choice but to comply if I wished to do so, but ultimately, he wouldn't want large-scale bloodshed.

"No, that's not it. Why would I use it for that?"

"Ah… I see."

"If it's not used in critical situations, that's enough."

"True. If you really need to use the Titan, it would involve that child in danger as well… Frankly, I don't want that."

Yes.

The Titan could be activated with both the Duke and Adelia.

Although it was close to a safety mechanism, it could also be considered the Titan's weakness that it could be operated without anyone's permission if only those two were captured.

Adelia might be a genius, but from the duke's perspective, she was still a child.

He wouldn't want to involve her in the power struggle between Darkland and the Empire.

Anyway.

Now that Adelia's name had been brought up rather smoothly, it was an opportunity.

"Let's set the Titan aside… Since it came up… You know, Adelia."

"Oh, right."

"How is she… Doing well?"

Cautiously.

Without raising suspicion.

I wanted to hear what the duke thought.

I had no intention of informing him if he didn't know.

I just wanted to check if the duke was really unaware.

At my question, the duke sighed, "Hmm…"

"Yes, Adelia was very close to our youngest, as you said…"

He seemed to think I was asking because of a request from Harriet.

This was good news.

"Although following the battlefield cannot be considered living well."

It was a bit strange to ask if she was doing well.

"Apart from her well-being, I suppose she could be considered safe."

I didn't want to know if she was safe or not; I wanted to know what the duke thought of Adelia.

What should I do?

"What do you think of Adelia, Your Grace?"

I don't know!

Just ask!

"I remember what you said once."

"…Me?"

"Didn't you say you'd create something that would astonish the world at the Magic Research Club meeting that you guys formed?"

Ah.

That's what he was referring to.

"I realized my perspective was much narrower than yours."

In the end, the Moonshine and Power Cartridge were created.

The result I predicted, even though I wasn't a magician, came true.

"Was that also an item that belonged to the future you knew?"

“…Yes."

"How interesting that someone who knows the future talks about it, but at the time, nobody believed… Or perhaps, that's just the nature of the future."

Who would believe someone talking about trivial events happening in the future?

"There are people who create miracles. Adelia is one of them."

People whose existence itself is a miracle, almost a blessing for humanity.

That was probably the highest praise the duke could offer.

But… Apart from that…

What should I really say?

Pretending not to care and asking such questions was incredibly difficult.

Does she seem like a girl to you?

I couldn't possibly say that!

"I've been thinking that if everything goes well and she's alright, I'd like to ask her to become a member of our family… What do you think?"

“…Pardon?"

Uh…

Excuse me?

No way?

"She was a good friend to our youngest, so wouldn't that be a good thing?"

No, that's not what I meant?

Could it be?

"It seems our third child is quite fond of Adelia, too."

I wanted to die.

Somehow, after exchanging the remaining words with the duke, I came out to the plaza feeling dejected.

Honestly, I didn't remember much of what we discussed afterward.

"Your Highness…?"

From afar, Eleris, wearing a hood, rushed over with a surprised look.

"It didn't seem like anything was wrong, but…"

No…

Nothing's wrong with me…

"Mom…"

"…Yes? Y-yes?"

"Mom, I want to die…"

"Your, Your Highness…?"

Mom!

Mother!

Although Eleris wasn't my mother, she was something like a great aunt!

Waaah!

I'd rather become a newborn and forget everything that's happened.

Seeing me suddenly wail like a baby, Eleris embraced me with a flustered expression.

"C-calm down. I don't know what's going on, but…”

Eleris patted my back.

I felt dizzy.

I was already dizzy.

And now I've heard something even more disorienting.

"Curiosity… Curiosity doesn't kill cats, it kills people…”

“…What?"

I resolved not to say anything when I went in!

Why did I ask such a pointless question when I was inside!

Ugh!

I'm an idiot.

Yeah.

CHAPTER 634

I had returned to Lazak with Eleris, not to the royal castle but to a quiet place nearby.

"Well, that's quite… a difficult situation to comment on…"

Even though I had done my job well, I had to explain why I was in such a state. Eleris's eyebrows twitched as she listened.

Adelia liked the Archduke.

However, the Archduke regarded Adelia as a daughter-in-law.

And Adelia was liked by Harriet's third older brother.

"It seems like I'm being punished…"

"Do you mean the Archduke is being punished?"

"No… not him…"

It felt as if not the Archduke, but I was the one being punished!

In my previous life, I had written too many trashy dramas. Now, I had to witness an even worse drama in the midst of a war!

It felt like I was the one being punished, not the Archduke!

I couldn't bring myself to say anything to the Archduke, who was struggling with this situation.

"I don't know, what can I do about that?"

"We can only watch…"

That's right. It wasn't something I could interfere with. I was merely curious, and it only caused me to suffer.

Somehow, it would work out! Right?

As long as everyone survived safely, who cared about a trashy drama? Even rolling in a dung heap, being alive was the best thing. After all, you needed to be alive to experience a trashy drama.

For the sake of the next episode of this trashy drama, I would protect the world, somehow.

Although it made me feel somewhat like a dog.

I didn't want to watch that drama anymore.

"By the way, it seems the dukedom has agreed to cooperate?"

"Yes… It turned out that way. It didn't go as smoothly as I thought."

"It didn't go as planned?"

"I thought the Archduke would treat me like a thief who had kidnapped his daughter, but he didn't. Instead, he seemed to feel guilty towards me."

"Ah…”

It was the one situation I knew the least about myself.

To be precise, others could think of things I couldn't because I wasn't Valier.

"Once he learned that the Great Demon War was a meaningless war, it seemed to affect him even more."

The story of the former Demon King Valier creating a new world through Akasha and attempting to migrate there.

The Archduke was the most shocked by the truth.

If it hadn't been for the Great Demon War, the demons would have quietly disappeared from this world.

However, humans invaded Darkland and slaughtered the demons.

As a result, the Demon King died, but the prince, Valier, survived, leading to the Gate incident.

The idea that if nothing had been done, everything would have been fine applied not only to me but also to the humans.

The Archduke seemed to think that humans had received their just retribution.

Eleris's expression was understandably dark.

"If we could go back to before the Great Demon War, could we undo everything?"

Could we make it so that there were no wars, no fears, and no invasions?

Knowing that the Great Demon War would lead to this, could we go back to the past and prevent everything?

"I don't think so."

I was pessimistic.

"Even if the Demon King or someone else said they were migrating to another world and not to interfere, who would believe that? No one would believe it, even if the Demon King said it."

Akasha was a powerful artifact in and of itself.

For instance, it was like trying to convince someone that a nuclear weapon was being developed for peaceful use, and they should rest assured. Anyone who believed that was a fool from the start.

Rather, the moment humanity became aware of Akasha's existence, war would break out to either steal or destroy it before its completion.

That's why Valier kept the existence of Akasha a secret.

The Great Demon War was ultimately a result of fear and hatred reaching a critical point.

As long as the accumulated history of fear, distrust, and hatred didn't disappear,

nothing would change even if they returned to the past.

The expression of Eleris, who once bore the brunt of that fear, distrust, and hatred, couldn't possibly have been good.

Eleris was the ancient demon king who had been betrayed by her own son and was exiled with her horns severed.

Eleris had personally activated Akasha.

Hence, she couldn't help but feel the greatest sense of responsibility and guilt for all that had happened.

Eleris had traded the entire world and her own life for me.

Because she loved me that much.

I couldn't even begin to fathom how much Eleris cherished me.

"The time when everything comes to an end is approaching."

"…"

Even if the Gate incident came to an end, the responsibility and guilt would not disappear.

However, it was clear that the time when everything would come to an end was approaching.

"Let's think about everything else after that."

"Yes… Your Majesty."

Meanwhile, after having a dizzying conversation, the Archduke had said such words.

"Do you remember the events at the Lich's Tomb?"

"Yes. I remember."

At that time, Antirianus and Archlich had fought.

I was astonished to find the Archduke suddenly at that place.

"There was a very strange person among those we saw then."

"Ah…"

I knew who the Archduke was talking about.

Because I, too, had seen someone for the first time that day.

Someone I couldn't have even imagined I'd see.

"Do you know?"

"Probably… Ellen's mother."

"…I thought they looked alike."

Chronologically, the Archduke would have noticed Ellen after meeting Luna.

That's why the Archduke would have been surprised that a girl who resembled the strange person he had met during the Lich's Tomb incident was a hero.

The Archduke hadn't seen me fighting Luna at the time.

He would remember that she had suddenly disappeared.

There was no doubt that the Archduke had also received a strong impression from Luna.

"The hero is a hero, but I think that person called Luna has an even stranger background. I wanted to seek her help if I had the chance……"

It seemed that, just like I thought, the Archduke had been considering asking for help from Luna, who was clearly not an ordinary person.

"In fact, I've already received her help."

"…What?"

"She had her own circumstances, so she couldn't help me directly."

The Archduke couldn't help but be surprised by the fact that I had already sought Luna's help and received it.

Since I couldn't give a detailed account without Luna's permission, I glossed over it. However, it seemed that the Archduke had accepted that the strange person was even stranger than he had thought.

Well, that's true.

She was someone who could create this world with her own hands and control its spacetime.

An incarnation.

Not just one, but the incarnation of gods.

Although my visit to Rezaira wasn't an incredibly long time ago, it felt like a distant memory from the distant past.

For instance, Luna and the people of Rezaira - I wondered how they were doing.

That thought crossed my mind briefly.

I had received enough help from Rezaira, and I didn't expect anything more from them.

I told Eleris about the conversation I had with the Archduke.

We had discussed various things, but the result was simple.

We had secured the support of three major powers.

The Holy Knights and the Five Great Religions.

Kingdom of Kernstadt.

And the Saint Owan Duchy.

"With just a few words, we've managed to gain control of half the world," I mused.

It was too easy.

"Too frightening, really."

It was so easy that it felt like my blood was drying up.

Swallowing them was easy.

The important thing was whether I could digest it all. If I couldn't, both I and the world would die.

Eleris cautiously embraced me.

"Everything will be alright."

“…Really?"

"Of course. Didn't the Archduke say so?"

As Eleris hugged my head, she said,

"You are the greatest and most perfect Demon King in history."

"…”

"I think so too."

Greatness and perfection.

I, who had once been furthest from such attributes, was now closer to them than ever before.

The cold body temperature of a vampire, as always, seemed to bring a measure of peace to my fear-stricken heart.

Eleris really was the best.

"Thank you, Ancestor."

“…Just call me Mom."

"Ah!"

Eleris pulled my ear.

The Saint Owan Duchy wasn't a large nation in terms of scale, but it held significance as a pillar of the empire's power.

In an uncertain future, being able to blockade one of the empire's main weapons, the Titan, held immense value.

If we managed to capture Adelia as well, we could even turn the Titan to our side.

Losing control of the Titan was a simple matter for the empire.

Could this have been Bertus's intention?

I couldn't be sure of that.

I convened a council of the Elders.

All but Sarkegaar, who was stationed with the allied forces, and Liana, who was recovering, attended.

Five Vampire Lords.

Olivia Lanze.

Harriet.

Charlotte.

Airi.

And myself.

"Now that we have Kernstadt and the Saint Owan Duchy under our control, we can

effectively dissolve the allied forces whenever we wish," said Luvien, the Lord of Thursday.

Yes, although it was impossible to take control at this point, we could dissolve the alliance immediately.

We could simply withdraw Kernstadt and the Archduke, as well as the Holy Knights, from the allied forces.

The allied forces would fall into panic, and a panicked army wouldn't function properly.

"However, even if we were to dissolve the allied forces, the Immortals remain the backbone of the war. As long as they remain unscathed, the empire's forces will hardly suffer any losses," said Gallarush.

As Gallarush pointed out, we couldn't affect the Immortals, who could be considered the empire's ultimate power, under the current circumstances.

"Of course, we're not saying that we'll dissolve the allied forces. We're just saying that we can if we want to," said Lucinil.

As Lucinil said, Luvien mentioned that it was possible, not that we would do it. It was merely a way of confirming our influence.

Control was impossible, but dissolution was possible.

And the allied forces represented the combined armies of humanity, with decision-making power held by the remaining leaders of humanity.

In effect, we had gained control over half of humanity.

Assuming the war ended as it was, we would have been able to divide the continent in half.

Antirianus wore a chilling smile.

"It's not just the Allied Forces. We currently have control over the major forces in the Imperial Capital, including the Five Great Religions, the Demon God Cult, and the Hero Religion. This means that everyone who believes in 'something,' regardless of

the type, is under our control."

All humans related to faith were under our influence. Most of them didn't even know that we were above their heads.

"You already rule over half of humanity, not just within the Allied Forces. A truly great existence."

Whether humans accepted our rule or not.

Whether they tolerated it or not.

I had already become their ruler.

"How is the United Holy Church doing?"

"We're teaching selected individuals from the Five Great Religions in the Imperial Capital how to use the power of the Demon God. It's difficult to see the effects in a short time, but the important thing there is faith, not power. We should consider the effects to be ongoing."

The converging of the Five Great Religions and the Demon God Cult was steadily progressing.

A few words.

A few conversations.

Was that all it took to rule the world?

However, laying the groundwork itself could only be easy.

What mattered was the moment when conflicts and collisions became apparent.

"If we could only find a surefire way to deal with the Immortals, we wouldn't have to fight the Empire."

It was Lucinil who spoke.

There was still no need to use the countermeasure even if we had one.

But if we reached the end of the Gate incident without knowing it, many difficulties would arise.

"Right, about that countermeasure."

Not long ago, new information had arrived through Rowan.

To be precise, it was information that Bertus sent through Rowan.

"Do we have a sacrificial method?"

Since the most important issue at the moment wasn't any other project but dealing with the Immortals, our expressions couldn't help but become serious.

"It's not a sacrificial method. Absolutely not."

Such a thing could not be called a sacrificial method.

"The ones controlling the Immortals are Christina and her two partners."

Everyone knew this because I had already told them.

Christina.

Anna.

Louis.

Those three were the core.

Harriet, who had already heard the story with me, didn't look very good.

"If we interfere with them carelessly, the Immortals will become indiscriminate slaughter weapons that can't identify their allies. They'll go berserk, quite literally."

Silence filled the room at that statement.

This was not a sacrificial method.

Only Antirianus faintly smiled and tilted his head.

"If I understand correctly, it sounds like the controller will eventually disappear."

“…I suppose so."

Yes.

This wasn't a sacrificial method, but the fact that it was still a way was the most horrifying thing.

A madman with a rabid dog wants to kill me.

If I kill the dog's owner, the rabid dog will not come after me.

Instead, it will bite and kill everyone it sees.

If I don't want to die, I can kill the dog's owner.

If I can ignore others being bitten to death, I can do that.

"Although it's an easy choice, the moment we choose it, everything we've done so far to end the Gate incident becomes meaningless, and it would even mean that we, with our own hands, bring an end to humanity."

As expected, Antirianus.

The mad old man began to laugh as if he were ecstatic.

We had been claiming to save humanity all this time.

But the moment we killed Christina, Anna, and Louis out of fear that the Immortal would hunt us down, the rampaging Immortal would wipe out humanity instead of monsters.

The rampaging Immortal wouldn't be able to reach Edina Archipelago. Soon, the continent would be shattered, humanity would be destroyed, but Lazak would be safe.

Claiming to protect humanity all this time, in the end, we would destroy humanity just to save ourselves.

Antirianus seemed to chuckle, imagining me choosing the option of trampling what I tried to do with my own hands.

There were times when I really wanted to kill that crazy old man.

This was not about stopping the Immortal.

It was possible to make the Immortal unable to kill me or my people.

In fact, it was too easy.

It wasn't that there was no answer.

There was an answer, but I just couldn't choose it.

As if he knew I would never choose it.

No, perhaps he even hoped I would choose it.

If I chose it.

Of course.

In the end, isn't your life the most precious?

Laughing while saying such things, did he plan to die?

Dying at the hands of the Immortal led by them wouldn't be revenge.

The moment I killed Christina, Anna, and Louis just to save my own life and the lives of those I loved, revenge would be complete.

That would be a greater hell than death.

"I'm telling you this now," I said, looking at everyone.

"The moment you touch Christina or those kids to save me, I'll slit the throat of the bastard who did it and then kill myself."

The Gate incident happened to save me.

This time, I couldn't let it be.

It wasn't meant to blame Eleris, but seeing her lower her head, I couldn't help but bite my lip.

It was something I had to say.

"Your Eminence, why not bring those children here and try tampering with their brains? As long as you don't kill them, isn't that fine? Or there's the method of torture."

"In a situation where we don't know the extent of 'touching,' we should be cautious about acting hastily. You couldn't have not imagined that much."

Antirianus laughed, as if he liked my cautious attitude.

Really.

What was it with that old man?

He seemed happy when I struggled.

Yet, he didn't play any tricks, and he only did what he was told.

"Don't do anything. We'll deal with it after the Gate incident is over."

Antirianus, who would surely be up to something, surprisingly wasn't, making it hard to suspect him.

Rather, there was a possibility that someone else would cause trouble in order to protect me.

A prime example would be Sarkegaar, who was not here.

And the new lunatic, Rowan.

I had to talk to both of them as well.

"Right, it's not like there absolutely has to be no other way."

Harriet also spoke, as if to say that there wasn't only one path to take, looking at me.

"That's right, there's no such thing as an absolute magic in this world. Just as there's no absolute barrier magic or sealing magic, there is a way to break them. We just haven't found it yet."

Gallarush nodded in agreement.

However, Gallarush's expression wasn't as hopeful as Harriet's.

It was surprising to myself that I could now read the expression of an orc.

Gallarush's nuance wasn't about finding another way.

"If we had time, we could find another way, but I don't think we have enough time for that."

"…"

That's right.

Time always held us back.

Surely, there must be a way to neutralize the Immortals without resorting to force.

But could we avoid a confrontation with the Immortals until we found that method?

I didn't think so.

There would be a way.

But it would take time to find it.

Would that time be enough?

Harriet seemed to have a sudden idea and raised her head abruptly.

"Right. The Immortals are golems in the end."

"…Technically, yes?"

"Maybe… my father might know something?"

The Immortals were golems.

And the Archduke of Saint Owan was an expert in golems.

"Even if he doesn't know right now, my father might know something more."

The situation had changed from before.

Now we could gain the cooperation of not only the Saint Owan Duchy but also the Archduke.

So, we could rely on the possibilities of the Archduke of Saint Owan, who had mastered the same field of magic.

That's right.

The Archduke of Saint Owan.

"Yes, speaking of which, there's something I need to ask."

A problem I couldn't decide on alone.

"I'd like to show the Archduke this place once. Is that okay?"

At those words, Harriet jumped up, startled, on the spot.

CHAPTER 635

If the Archduke were to visit Edina, that would be helpful.

The Council of Elders responded, telling us to do as we saw fit.

However, Lucinil suggested limiting the number of Archdukes who could come to Edina to just one, as it might be dangerous. Naturally, Harriet and I agreed.

We couldn't be sure if the Archduke would truly be able to provide us with any leads, but if not, it would simply be unfortunate.

Perhaps if we discussed the matter together, we might find a solution.

A few days later.

"Dad!"

-Warak!

From a distance, I watched Harriet run towards the Archduke and embrace him fervently.

Time can change many things.

I wondered when the daughter who used to be annoyed by her father had become like this.

It seemed like just yesterday when I had to secretly visit Arunaria to discuss heavy matters and then return.

Now that the Archduke had decided to be on our side, Harriet could meet her family as much as she wanted.

It wasn't a tearful reunion.

Instead of crying, Harriet was filled with excitement, and the Archduke looked

content.

After holding each other for a while, the father and daughter finally released their embrace, and the Archduke looked at me.

"Thank you, Reinhardt."

"I should be the one thanking you."

Seeing the Archduke's gratitude somehow made the back of my head itch.

It didn't seem like something worthy of being thanked for.

Was it really a matter of receiving gratitude for doing something obvious?

Just like the hatred one receives for being the Demon King, I felt strange whenever I experienced the favor and gratitude that came with being the Demon King.

The Archduke stood at the entrance of the royal palace, looking down at the scenery of Edina, spread out beneath the hill.

Now that the Archduke knew where this place was, he could come here whenever he wanted.

"I see… if it's an island… yes, it makes sense that it could be like this…"

The Archduke seemed to feel an odd, intense emotion as he stared blankly at the peaceful seaside village of Lazak.

"I can't believe there are still places with such scenery…"

Due to the vast barrier of the sea, flying monsters from the mainland couldn't reach this place.

Edina Archipelago itself was a tourist destination, so the weather was nice, the sky was clear, and the sea was transparent.

It was a beautiful landscape.

But that wasn't all.

"I never thought such a place could exist…"

From a distance, one could see demons and humans living together.

Of course, there were still humans who feared demons, but there were also humans who spoke with demons without hesitation.

The Archduke's eyes widened as he watched them coexist.

It was as if he was trying to properly regret the moments of the past when he hadn't known such a thing was possible.

As if he was trying to think about how pointless the war in the Demon World had been, without avoiding the topic.

"During the initial stages of the Gate Incident, I focused on coming here and stabilizing this region. That's why the damage wasn't too severe."

The moment the Gate Incident occurred, I immediately came to Edina and saved Airi.

Then, I destroyed all the warp gates in the archipelago.

"That's right, after that, we established a base on the mainland and evacuated humans and demons from there to here. We've been doing that ever since."

Harriet began to explain to the Archduke what we had been doing here since the Gate Incident.

During their last meeting, there had been stories she couldn't share, but now, with no more secrets to keep, she explained everything from beginning to end.

Harriet seemed more excited than ever before.

She had done something.

She had tried to do what she could.

And that's how she had been able to create such a world.

The Duke looked down at his daughter, who was excitedly talking about this and

that.

With a faint smile on his face.

Not only what she had done, but also what others had accomplished.

How Olivia Lanze, with whom she had such a poor relationship, had helped people.

How many succubi had been truly loved by people.

How Charlotte was now stabilizing the once-chaotic Edina.

Harriet spoke incessantly, as if she wanted to share not only her own achievements but also those of others.

It was strange.

The Duke was supposed to be moved, but somehow, I felt myself being swept up in Harriet's enthusiasm.

Harriet loved this country a lot.

She took pride in it.

Seeing Harriet sincerely considering others and feeling proud, my mood somehow turned strange.

Perhaps the Duke felt the same way.

The Duke, unable to stop his talkative daughter, placed his hand on her head.

"It reminds me of the old days."

“…Old days? All of a sudden?"

Harriet cocked her head as if wondering what this had to do with the old days.

"You used to crave praise a lot."

"Wh-why are you bringing that up now…?"

With her face turning red, Harriet glanced at me.

"Whenever you learned a new spell, you would demonstrate it and look up at your father with those eyes, just like you are now."

“…Did I?"

In Arunaria, where there were few people, Harriet had been a genius, so she must have known magic from a young age.

I imagined a young Harriet flipping through magic books to earn praise from her father, mother, or older brothers. The thought was suffocatingly adorable.

"It wasn't just magic. Whenever you learned something new, you'd brag about it. You recited poetry and novels you'd memorized more than once."

It was natural for children to want to be praised by their parents.

From that perspective, there was no way a daughter who proudly studied hard wouldn't be lovable. And she was a genius, so she must have lived with words of praise on her lips.

But in the end, a child was still a child.

"Our youngest… When you were so young…”

The Duke looked down at the hill below and spoke.

"Now you're bragging about saving countless lives…”

The child who used to bring home perfect test scores had grown up and was now boasting about saving numerous lives.

Before he knew it, the corners of the Duke's eyes had reddened.

"D-Dad…?"

With that look in his eyes, the Duke wrapped his arm around Harriet's waist and lifted her up.

Holding his daughter, who was no longer a child, the Duke spoke as if handling a young girl.

His daughter, who was once only smart, inconsiderate, and arrogant.

Seeing her take pride not in her intelligence, brilliance, or abilities, but in saving someone's life. Watching her feel proud of it.

What parent wouldn't be moved by that?

"You've done well. My daughter."

It was like when Harriet was young.

However, it carried a weight that couldn't possibly be the same as when she was young.

It was the highest praise and expression of gratitude a parent could offer.

As the duke's eyes reddened, Harriet's eyes welled up with tears too.

"Dad… did I do well?"

"Yes, you did well."

"I… I tried my best. I really… worked hard with Reinhardt… I couldn't do everything perfectly, but I still did my best. It was hard… not being able to save everyone. It was painful. But… sniff! Still… still…"

Harriet's sobbing eventually turned into wailing.

"Still… I did well, right? I did a good job, didn't I?"

When she thought of the people she saved, she couldn't help but think of the people she couldn't save.

"Of course, you did."

"Sniff… sob! Sob! Ugh! Ugh!"

The duke carefully embraced his youngest daughter, who was wailing.

In the end, their reunion was a tearful one.

“…I'm so embarrassed."

Harriet's eyes were swollen from crying, and her face was flushed.

"Go on, go for a walk with your dad."

"Uh, um… what are you saying now?"

"If you're not a baby, then what are you? Anyway, go and cry some more, the duke won't have much time."

"You're unbelievable!"

The duke had taken time off from leading the allied forces to be here.

He had a lot to do, and in reality, he was practically on unauthorized leave.

He would have to return soon, so they needed to talk while they still had time.

Harriet briskly led the way, holding her father's hand as they walked down the hill.

A daughter going for a walk, hand in hand with her father.

She was acting like a baby.

The duke followed with a smile as Harriet led the way.

"I never thought I'd see such a sight in my life. Ugh."

Olivia Lanze appeared next to me, seemingly out of nowhere or perhaps she had been watching from afar.

Pretending to be disgusted, Olivia made a gagging gesture.

"What's wrong with that? It looks nice."

"I was an orphan, so I never had a father. The one I did have beat me with a whip, so I can't sympathize at all."

“…You were beaten with a whip?"

Was Riverrier Lanze that cruel?

"It's just a figure of speech. It wasn't that bad. But being whipped would've been better."

Why would she lie about something like that?

But I knew what Olivia meant.

Harriet had devoted herself to magic, not because of her parents' pressure, but because she enjoyed being praised and studied on her own.

Olivia had lived a forced life.

She never received praise.

No matter what achievements she made, she would always hear that it wasn't enough.

After living under near-brainwashing pressure, Olivia had become an empty shell of a person.

Olivia continued to watch Harriet and the duke walk away.

Her gaze seemed to be filled with longing for something she never had.

"I didn't realize it, but I must be a twisted person."

For some reason, Olivia looked at me and laughed heartily.

“…You're just realizing that now? That's what's really twisted."

"What did you say?"

"That's why it's good."

"Hmph. Fine, then."

Olivia crossed her arms, gazing down at the landscape of Lazak.

"Actually, I've been really scared lately."

I knew what she was afraid of without her having to say it.

"It's probably too late to say that staying like this wouldn't be so bad and that we should stop this madness, right?"

“…I suppose so."

If we hadn't grasped it yet, it might have been possible.

But there were things we had already seized.

They wouldn't return to their original state just because we let go.

Instead, they would fall to the ground and shatter.

The phrase 'breaking through the bamboo' means advancing while pushing aside dense bamboo groves.

But could the advance of the Allied forces truly be described as breaking through the bamboo?

The Allied forces were undoubtedly advancing without hesitation, but they did not fight anything or anyone.

The commanders of the various armies had come to know that an unknown, powerful force was fighting ahead of them, and that the Empire was using some evil power. It was inevitable that this information would spread, albeit cautiously.

A power that could not be revealed to anyone.

An evil power.

And a powerful force.

People naturally thought of one thing.

Had the Empire joined hands with the Demon King?

People could only naturally imagine what was within the realm of their imagination.

People didn't think about the Demon King when he was helping the advance, but now that he was not actually leading the vanguard, they thought about the Demon King.

That was because the Demon King that people imagined was a very frightening existence.

In fact, the Demon King and his forces were even stronger than people imagined, so people were more likely to have such thoughts.

The rumors that spread in fear and dread had no basis.

How the Demon King had joined hands with the Empire.

Why the Demon King was helping the Empire.

Why the Empire had joined hands with the Demon King.

Filling in the unimaginable parts with delusions of some unknown basis, they simply imagined.

The Demon King might be lurking somewhere.

What would the Demon King take in exchange for helping humans?

The seed of confusion and anxiety had sprouted in everyone's hearts, even though they were told to watch their words because spreading groundless rumors could cause chaos.

In the end, the Allied forces had not fought for a long time, so their minds were busy

rather than their bodies.

Nothing was certain.

As time passed, it was the 5th month.

The Allied forces canceled all other routes to major cities and moved in one direction.

The capital of Riselen, Diane.

The conquest of the other major cities was not yet complete.

But the Allied forces were moving straight to the site of the final battle.

"It's amazing that Rosentine could be dealt with just by the Immortals…" Bertus muttered as he blankly read the battle report from the Immortals.

The port city of Rosentine.

Two major cities built nearby were in close proximity, effectively creating a situation where three cities were attached. Thus, when entering Rosentine's territory, they had to conquer three cities in a row.

Considering the gates were becoming increasingly dangerous, if they left this place as the last point of conquest, they might not be able to end the Gate Crisis.

Soon, it was an even more difficult place to capture than the capital.

In effect, they couldn't just conquer one city, so they had to subdue all three cities at once.

That's why the Immortals decided to conquer the area around Rosentine before it became too dangerous to suppress, and they succeeded in pacifying the area with the Immortals alone.

"However, about 80% of the Immortals were damaged. It seems impossible to carry out battles for the conquest of major cities with just the Immortals now."

"So we can't rely solely on the Immortals anymore."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Both the Titan and the other Allied forces had to fight.

They had destroyed all three major cities near Rosentine, where the biggest chaotic battle had been anticipated.

The Allied forces now advanced towards the capital of Riselen, Diane.

There were a total of three major cities along the route.

The remaining small and medium-sized cities would be dealt with by the Immortals during the march.

If the Allied forces could capture all three cities, the Gate Crisis would be over.

There were three battles left.

The end was in sight.

They could put an end to this tedious flow of destruction.

The Immortals could not be hidden forever.

Soon, when large-scale battles began, the Immortals would have to fight alongside the Allied forces.

CHAPTER 636

The warp gates had reached a level incomparable to their initial state, and could no longer be compared to the early stages of the allied forces' advance.

Each warp gate had become a fountain spewing monsters, endlessly vomiting them into the world, and their number had become incomparable to the past.

However, many things had changed from the direction the world was originally supposed to follow.

In the original story, the gate crisis eventually came to an end.

Compared to the original timeline, humanity's power was overwhelmingly superior.

For starters, there was Titan, a massive weapon that didn't exist in the original story.

That alone was overwhelming, and there were also the Immortals, the army of the undead.

The gate crisis itself had not changed.

Strictly speaking, even without Titan and the Immortals, the gate crisis was supposed to end eventually. It would take a little longer than it did now, but a weaker humanity could not have failed to overcome this disaster.

6th month.

The allied forces began their assault on Wallen, a large city on their way to the capital city of Riselen, Diane.

It was the first large-scale battle since the battle of Serandia, which had taken place at the end of the previous winter.

There was Titan, which had grown much stronger since Serandia.

And there were the Immortals, who hadn't even existed during Serandia.

And then there were the original allied forces.

"Unbelievable…"

The overwhelming power that made Shanafel and the Royal Mage Corps pale in comparison.

The allied forces wouldn't know what the mysterious army, suddenly appearing and slaughtering monsters with their Aura Blades while clad in full-body armor, was.

However, they were at the forefront of cutting down and killing the monsters.

The mages who didn't actually participate in the battle: Adelia, Christina, Louis Ancton, and Anna de Gerna.

They were effectively in control of the battlefield.

Humanity had become stronger than in the original story.

The gate crisis would no longer be a problem.

I couldn't help but be certain the moment I saw the allied forces' battle.

I didn't need to watch until the end.

Wallen would fall.

Now there were only two cities left.

Not much time remained until the fate of everyone, including me, would be determined.

As Titan disappeared into a flash of light and retreated, the battle was already over.

The rain of fire and ice that had dyed the sky red ceased, and the thunderous roar of war machines and artillery fire also stopped.

The strange army's help had indeed expedited the battle's conclusion, but that didn't

mean the others hadn't played their part.

In a place where the corpses of gigantic monsters formed a mountain.

After destroying the massive warp gate with a single strike, Ellen drove her final blow into the mountain of remaining monsters, then slowly stood up from atop the mountain.

"Hero…"

Those who could follow Ellen this far into the heart of the battlefield were naturally not ordinary people.

However, even they could not help but look up at Ellen with eyes as if they were gazing upon a god.

It was Ellen's first appearance since Serandia.

But those who had fought alongside Ellen all this time couldn't help but feel that the hero was very different now.

Even when entering battle,

Even during the battle,

And even now, when the battle had ended,

There was something about the emptiness in her eyes and expression.

"Hero… Are you all right?"

The knight who had accompanied her cautiously asked Elen, who had leaped down the mountain of corpses with a few swift jumps.

Elen slowly nodded her head, saying nothing more.

Her emotionless fighting style had become more refined and sharper.

As if she had paid the price by sacrificing everything unrelated to battle.

Elen had grown stronger since Serandia.

However, those who saw her couldn't help but feel a tremendous sense of incongruity.

Somehow, it seemed like her every move and action lacked a soul.

Everyone couldn't help but feel that way.

Despite the cities becoming more dangerous, the Alliance's casualties were fewer than during Serandia when they had conquered Wallen.

Everyone knew that the enhanced power of the Titans played a crucial role in this.

And another thing.

A force too powerful to be overlooked had appeared.

All of them wore iron helmets with face-covering masks as the vanguard.

And in the rear, an immense number of archmages, all clad in black robes.

Everyone knew that it was because of them that Wallen had fallen faster and easier than during Serandia.

Who were they?

They appeared suddenly to help in the battle, and then vanished as if evaporating, along with their massive teleportation.

After the conquest of Wallen and the establishment of an outpost on the outskirts, the Alliance could only stay there for a while to deal with the aftermath of the battle.

In the Alliance Command headquarters,

“…I have finished reporting the casualties."

The combined casualties of each army and the measures taken had all been

discussed.

"Once the wounded are treated, we will march immediately to the next target. Since the casualties are fewer than expected, we can prepare to move out quickly."

The Emperor did not mention what should have been discussed.

Everyone knew that the hidden vanguard of the Empire had been the army that had appeared today.

They were numerous master-class fighters and archmages.

There had never been a nation in history with such a level of power. It was no wonder that archmages and master-class fighters were called the strongest of humanity.

Even combining all of humanity, there were only around one to two hundred archmages and master-class fighters in one era. There were some unknown hermits, but they were not numerous.

That number surpassed the standard of the era by more than ten times.

The Emperor insisted on maintaining his attitude of not explaining anything.

However, those sitting in the command headquarters could not help but feel uneasy about the Emperor's silence.

The Holy Knight Commander said that since the Emperor wanted to bear all the responsibility alone, they should not demand an explanation and just follow along obediently.

The responsibility lay entirely with the Emperor.

But after witnessing the might of the army that had finally revealed itself, everyone couldn't help but be terrified.

Was this a matter that could be taken responsibility for?

Was such a powerful army really without any problems?

Could it be that they had really joined hands with the Demon King?

If what they had just faced was the Demon King's army,

How did the Emperor plan to take responsibility for that?

"Your Majesty… Have you truly joined hands with the Demon King?"

In the end, someone who couldn't overcome their anxiety mustered the courage to speak up.

The Emperor quietly looked at the person who had spoken those words.

"Of course not."

The emperor calmly denied the conjecture.

"It seems I can no longer hide it."

Emperor Bertus slowly shook his head, and finally, a faint smile appeared on his face.

"I have acquired the dark magic that revives the dead, making them even stronger than when they were alive."

Everyone's eyes widened as if they were about to burst at this explosive declaration.

Only two people had different expressions.

Holy Knight Commander Rowan showed a faint smile.

Louise von Schwarz bit her lip, as if she had been expecting this.

"It's an army of immortals, stronger than when they were alive, and capable of being redeployed on the battlefield through a slight regeneration process after dying once."

"A lot of material was needed for this."

"Once-great heroes of humanity, warriors, knights, and mages. All of them, who had slumbered amid our praise and admiration, have been resurrected to fight for humanity."

"Moreover, after the Gate incident, we have revived numerous casualties and once again enlisted them."

"Until now, you believed that those who died as heroes were properly laid to rest after the funeral proceedings. No, that's not the case at all."

"I secretly took their corpses, resurrected them as undead, and redeployed them in this war."

"I call this army the Immortals."

"This is the truth you all have been curious about."

"Joining hands with the Demon King."

"How could I join hands with the Demon King, an enemy of humanity?"

The emperor laughed.

"Such a despicable act would be impossible."

Indeed, it was a terrible laugh.

"So, don't die carelessly."

The emperor spoke with a cold tone.

"Unless you want to become an Immortal."

Everyone had no choice but to freeze before the emperor's smile.

"And…"

Once again, the emperor showed a meaningful smile.

"Isn't it one of you who joined hands with the Demon King, not me?"

The emperor dropped a bombshell.

Not just one, but two.

Is it worse to join hands with the Demon King or to revive dead comrades and send them back to the battlefield?

Undoubtedly, both were terrible, and no one could deny that.

As the emperor suddenly revealed secrets, the commanders of each army had no choice but to panic.

Moreover, the emperor did not reveal just one secret.

There were those among the allied forces who were in collusion with the Demon King.

As if to ask when he had kept such a secret, the emperor revealed two shocking truths that would make everyone gasp.

An army of undead called Immortals.

The existence of those who betrayed humanity.

Everyone now had to consider this.

Who exactly betrayed humanity? Who sided with the Demon King?

If the truth had been revealed one by one, accidents that would not have occurred would happen.

The empire and the emperor resorted to dark magic to end the war.

While there are levels of dark magic that are tolerated in the world, dark magic involving the undead is, of course, forbidden.

And the details go beyond just commanding the undead.

It is an insult to the physical bodies and souls of those who died honorably.

For now, the justification of ending the Gate incident would protect the emperor.

However, there is no guarantee that what can be justified now can also be justified later.

The empire laid hands on a power that should never have been touched.

Firstly, they insulted the deaths of the greatest heroes in human history.

Once allies to someone and family to another, these people were revived as undead and used – this was the second offense.

Although they couldn't be held accountable right away, eventually the empire would have to pay the price for dabbling in forbidden powers.

Under the assumption that there was a force capable of doing so. Those among humanity who learned of this now possessed a justification to topple the empire at any time after humanity's reconstruction.

After everything had improved, after humanity's reconstruction.

With a justification to topple the continent's highest power, there would undoubtedly be those who would use it.

Thus, from the moment the empire reached for that power, it was as if it had already been handed a death sentence.

In a normal situation, if there were those who had betrayed humanity and sided with the Demon King, vengeful individuals would have fervently sought them out.

But the situation was different now.

The emperor had gone mad.

The empire might be able to maintain its existence through force for now, but it would soon be shunned by everyone.

Already, word had spread within the allied forces about the mass slaughter of civilians committed by the imperial royal family.

The presence of those on the Demon King's side meant there were those colluding with the Demon King.

Soon.

The collusion between the Demon King and humans suggested the possibility that the Demon King intended to use humans and spare their lives.

The Demon King could also be an alternative.

The fall of the empire was certain.

Amidst this, someone had bet on the Demon King's victory, and the Demon King intended to use them.

Choosing the Demon King could also be one of the ways to survive.

The identity of the Immortals.

And the human traitors.

By throwing both truths together, Bertus caused a massive confusion in people's minds.

To what extent had the Demon King reached out?

What were their choices?

Would it be the empire, which had wielded a powerful force but committed unforgivable deeds?

Or the Demon King, the origin of all this chaos and who might devour humanity?

Both were horribly unpleasant.

However, if they didn't choose a victor, they might face another annihilation after barely surviving this one.

The time to choose was approaching.

And then.

"Oh my…”

Holy Knight Commander Rowan faintly smiled as she received an internal report on the current situation of the Imperial Capital.

"It seems quite an interesting event is unfolding…"

In front of Rowan's eyes was a half-torn piece of paper.

A roughly scribbled wall poster.

"So, this is what's posted on the streets of the Imperial Capital?"

"Yes, Commander."

Rumors were circulating in the Imperial Capital.

[The Emperor caused the Gate incident.]

The absurd rumor that the Gate incident occurred because of the Emperor.

Such a rumor was slowly.

But surely.

Spreading.

CHAPTER 637

Two days after the fall of Wallen.

"At this rate, all the Immortals will be restored within five days."

In the underground laboratory of the Temple Magic University, Christina slowly nodded as she watched the damaged bodies of the Immortals being slowly restored at the port.

The most terrifying aspect of the Immortals was not their strength, but their automatic recovery.

They were like golems, machines that could be reactivated with just some repairs.

Thus, the true power of the Immortals came from their resurrection.

An army that could not die.

The only living being in that army was Ludwig.

Naturally, Ludwig participated in the battle of Wallen as a member of the Immortals, wearing a helmet and a face guard.

Although all the Immortals had outstanding strength, Ludwig was particularly exceptional among them.

He had to endure even more powerful dark magic and undergo Chimera procedures to resist dark magic. That was why Ludwig was inevitably stronger than the other Immortals.

As a result of enduring the unbearable, he was stronger than the other Immortals.

The coalition forces had only fought once since the Serandia battle, but Ludwig, who moved with the Immortals, had hardly any time to rest.

As long as Ludwig fought alongside the tireless dead soldiers, he had no choice but to

be deployed on even more battlefields.

Occasionally, seizures would occur due to the rejection response, but his condition after the Wallen battle was relatively good.

"Ugh…"

Ludwig clenched his mouth shut as he gulped down the dark liquid.

"Ugh! Ugh!"

After retching for a moment, Ludwig barely managed to swallow the liquid and let out a deep sigh.

Even Ludwig, whose only strength was endurance, had sunken eyes from experiencing countless exhausting battles.

By his side, Louis Ancton and Anna were checking on Ludwig.

What Ludwig had just drunk was an alchemy potion to alleviate the rejection response.

"It's definitely effective. But I'm sorry to say this… Why does it taste so bad…?"

Ludwig covered his mouth while trying to steady his breath, as if he was about to throw up.

Ludwig was not retching due to the rejection response but because of the terrible taste.

"I wouldn't mind if it was just bitter, but there's something nauseating about the smell… The taste is just as bad, it feels like my tongue is rotting…"

Ludwig, who had endured pain that would have shocked ordinary people, shuddered as if he couldn't bear the taste of the sedative.

Seeing Ludwig look even more miserable because of the terrible taste, Christina shrugged her shoulders.

"Actually, there's no reason for it to taste so disgusting."

“…Huh?"

"I made it that way on purpose."

"What?"

At that remark, not only Ludwig, but also Louis and Anna, who were checking Ludwig's condition, looked shocked.

She had deliberately made it taste disgusting.

"If it tasted bearable, you'd keep seeking it out. So I made it that way to ensure you'd only drink it when you really need to."

“…So, is this bad for my body?"

"Of course it's not good."

Although the sedative was preventing Ludwig's body from collapsing or causing a rejection response, it was ultimately a very dangerous substance.

"Even if it's fine now, it won't be good to drink it often."

So when she said she had deliberately made it taste disgusting, Ludwig nodded with a bewildered expression.

"Anyway… People saw the Immortals during this battle. Is that alright?"

Louis Ancton cautiously brought up the topic.

Up until now, the Immortal had operated in secret, but in this battle, it revealed itself to the entire allied forces.

Everyone knew that the atmosphere was becoming more unstable by the minute.

"The situation is bound to get complicated, but it's not our concern."

As Christina said, politics was for those who played political games.

"If people find out about the true nature of the Immortal, things will get really…

complicated."

"It's good if it gets complicated."

Christina looked at the bodies undergoing reconstruction from a distance and spoke.

"As things get more complicated, the hidden ones will start to crawl out one by one."

“…Ah."

"Once everything is over and they've gone into hiding, we'll never be able to find them. They'll show their faces one by one."

Christina had no interest in politics, nor did she care about how things unfolded.

But chaos inevitably bred opportunities.

Opportunists would always appear when opportunities arose.

Those who had been hidden and could not be found so far would also poke their heads out among such people.

That was all they needed to know.

There was no need to know more.

Those who caused chaos.

Those who exploited chaos.

"All we have to do is wait."

And those who waited for everyone to gather amid the chaos.

With different thoughts in mind, the Gate Incident was heading towards its end.

"Let's start heading back."

There was no need for them to stay in this already automated facility.

In the end, they all had a single goal.

They would all go there together.

There were those who conspired with the Demon King.

As the allied forces continued to move toward their next destination, they whispered among themselves, and fierce mind games unfolded.

"How could this be possible? We must find and judge the evil ones who conspired with the betrayers of humanity as soon as possible."

Some insisted on this.

"The weapon of the Empire is too dangerous. Of course, conspiring with the Demon King is a serious matter, but blindly supporting the Empire is also very risky."

There were those who disliked both sides.

"…"

There were those who swallowed what they wanted to say and said nothing.

In the absence of the Emperor, Louise von Schwarz quietly watched the influential people from various places gather at the Kernstadt Army Headquarters and discuss.

The influential people tried to find a focal point in this chaotic situation.

Unable to gather under the Emperor, who had tampered with an excessively dangerous power, they chose Louise as an alternative and gathered in front of her.

Noise-canceling had been deployed, so the conversation would not leak outside the barracks.

However, the Emperor had said something that should not have been said in a place with too many people.

Too many ears heard it, and too many mouths knew of it.

The story of the Demon King's conspirators within the allied forces.

The story that the army that appeared in the Wallen battle was actually made from the corpses of war heroes would soon spread throughout the entire allied forces.

The secret would only be kept temporarily.

The whole world would learn of the Empire's madness and the existence of numerous human traitors.

And Louise was one of those traitors.

Louise watched those who believed they should be wary to both sides, those who were excited to slaughter the Demon King's conspirators, and those who silently observed the situation.

In the end, not everyone was needed.

"What do you think, Commander?"

There were commanders from various armies present, but the only person who could be called the Commander in this gathering was Louise. After all, she had the largest army.

Everyone looked at Louise von Schwarz.

The current number two of the allied forces.

Her words carried considerable weight. That was why the Emperor had sought her out, not someone else.

Surprised by the sudden downpour, they had gathered to find shelter.

Knowing that the great tree, named the Empire, which had protected them until now, was on the verge of rotting and collapsing, they flocked to the shade of the relatively healthier-looking tree named Kernstadt.

The Demon King, the Emperor, the Empire.

Wondering how it had come to this.

Saying they should kill the traitors of humanity, yet still uncertain.

Louise closed her eyes, feeling the attention focused on her.

"Hmm…"

The Emperor had thrown the dice.

"I…"

It was a signal.

A signal that she, too, must now throw the dice.

"I support the Demon King."

Should she have expected cold water to be thrown on her?

Or should she have expected to be frozen?

Despite the situation, the sight of the people turning to stone as they sat was quite amusing to Louise.

What people had hoped to hear from Louise's mouth was an analysis of the current situation, a prediction, and the direction humanity should take.

They had been waiting for her to show them the way.

Whether there was still a future for the Empire.

What attitude to take toward the Demon King's collaborators.

Whether to take action right away or not.

They had expected such a discussion.

They had hoped for some insight or prediction.

Of course, in their minds, there was no scenario where the commander of Kernstadt would say she supported the Demon King.

There was certainly no one who had predicted that she, of all people, was the collaborator.

"What the hell…?"

For a long time, numerous people were frozen in place, unable to say a word, and when they finally opened their mouths, that was all they could say.

"It's not that difficult to understand, is it? I am the Demon King's collaborator."

The people's faces turned ashen at her next, even more explosive declaration.

Supporting him, and beyond that, saying that she was the collaborator.

None other than her.

The commander of the second-largest army, excluding the Empire, had boldly declared her support for the Demon King.

There was no one in the room who could stand up, drag out the traitor of humanity, and hang her.

There was only one thought in everyone's mind.

Since when?

Had Kernstadt, not another country, been in collusion with the Demon King?

Why had no one known until now?

Those who had been shouting until their throats were raw that they had to punish the Demon King's collaborators would have rather bitten their tongues and died right there.

The rage of those people gradually turned to terror.

They had been shouting to kill the Demon King's collaborators in front of one of

them.

"Do you think I'm the only collaborator?"

In the blink of an eye, the great power of Kernstadt had fallen into the hands of the Demon King without them realizing it.

Do you think it's just Kernstadt?

Can you even guess how many forces have fallen into the hands of the Demon King without your knowledge?

Louise thrust another thought into the confused minds of those present.

What should one do if there were numerous collaborators of the Demon King?

Should they join their side to survive?

Louise didn't reveal everything.

She didn't say that the Holy Knights and the Five Great Religions were on the Demon King's side or that the Archduke of Saint-Owan had sided with the Demon King.

She didn't reveal everything.

There was absolutely no need to.

"Think carefully about why I said this. Where my confidence comes from. Why I chose to support the Demon King."

If they were to imagine on their own, fueling their inner fear, they would inevitably build even larger delusions than reality.

Fear grows uncontrollably.

"Those who will join my cause, stay."

"Those who won't, leave."

"But I can't guarantee that the door to my headquarters will be open next time."

Just as the name of the Demon King once created a more significant infamy than the actual power he possessed.

This time, the fear within them would make them submit to it themselves.

"I'll give you 10 minutes."

A mere 10 minutes.

It was an excessively short time to determine the fate of the world.

But the pressing time brought anxiety, and the mention of no next opportunity plunged humans into fear.

The words "no next chance" were nothing short of coercion.

When those anxious 10 minutes had passed, there were empty seats in the headquarters.

Certainly, some had left their seats.

But there were far more seats that remained occupied.

"…"

In the end, even when adding all the rage and hatred, did it collapse before the absolute desire to survive?

Louise could not feel any satisfaction in the sight before her eyes.

CHAPTER 638

"Your Highness, Titan's maintenance has been completed."

"Good job."

As he received Adelia's report, the Archduke was reading a book in the research tent.

"Your Highness, it seems that further maintenance or upgrades to the Titan will be difficult at this point. We anticipate that we will reach the next planned battle site sooner."

"I suppose so. Maintain the existing equipment, and there's no need to consider further attachments."

"Can we consider Titan complete as it is?"

"I suppose so."

As planned, Titan would only participate in two more battles.

"In the future, Titan will be used only twice more. After that, it would be better if there were no need for Titan."

"I see."

Adelia nodded at the Archduke's words.

It was better if such a massive war machine had no use.

After the Gate incident was over, it should only be used to deal with the remaining monsters, not for any other purpose.

Therefore, there was no need to improve Titan beyond this level.

So both Adelia and the Archduke could free themselves from the time spent focusing on Titan and maintain its current state.

It meant they were finally free from their heavy responsibilities.

Adelia looked at the Archduke sitting in his chair.

Perhaps because he no longer needed to research Titan, the Archduke was reading a book instead of research documents.

They had hardly ever discussed anything beyond work.

So, Adelia couldn't help but be curious when she saw the Archduke reading a book unrelated to Titan.

"May I ask… what book are you reading?"

Judging from the complex content and diagrams, she could roughly guess it was a magic book.

"It's the family's grimoire."

"What? Ah, I apologize… That was not my intention."

She dared to glance at the grimoire of the Saint Owan family while he was reading it.

Knowing how important a grimoire was, her face turned red with embarrassment for asking such an inappropriate question.

The Archduke faintly smiled at the flustered Adelia.

“……I misspoke. I apologize. I meant that you would not find the content interesting. You already know it."

The Archduke closed the book and showed her the title.

[Magic Automaton - 27]

"…?"

Magic Automaton.

Of course, Adelia knew what it was.

"Is it a book about golems?"

"Strictly speaking, it's a book about all devices that use magic as a power source. Golems are one of those things, so I can't say it's not about them."

It included magic trains, warp gates, and golems.

Adelia's talent, Magic Crafting, was specialized in this field.

It was a very comprehensive field of study, but the fact that there were at least 27 incredibly thick volumes meant something.

Adelia had learned and understood almost everything about golems while building Titan. Most of this knowledge came from the Saint Owan family, so even if she hadn't read it directly, it was as if she had read it all.

The Archduke's remark that she would not find the content interesting was for that reason.

However, Adelia marveled at something else.

The Saint Owan family did not embrace dark and unlawful powers, but that meant they were interested in all other magic fields.

The scale of the grimoire that the Saint Owan family had accumulated over a long period of time was truly impressive.

There were more than 27 volumes of books on magic devices alone, each with considerable thickness. Adelia wondered how many other visions there might be.

Adelia felt the overwhelming weight of time.

Without such accumulated knowledge, she believed that the Titan could not have been created.

However, it was strange.

The Archduke said that there was no need to improve the Titan now.

Yet he was reading the vision of a family related to golems, which he should

remember quite well.

As if understanding Adelia's doubts, the Archduke shook his head.

"It has nothing to do with the Titan. The story written in this book is not about that."

"Ah… I see."

"More precisely, it records research on a remote control neural network that goes into a magic device."

"You mean… the system within the Master Orb?"

"It's part of it."

The Archduke and Adelia used the Master Orb to activate and control the Titan.

A remote control neural network.

Adelia could not understand why the Archduke was looking at it now.

Naturally, the Archduke couldn't explain why he was looking at it either.

He couldn't say that he was thinking about how to neutralize the Immortal due to the Demon King's request.

The Immortal was an unknown magic to the Archduke.

Therefore, he did not know how to neutralize it.

He could only imagine it.

At that moment, he was in the process of finding a clue.

"Have you ever been to Arnaca?"

The capital of the Saint Owan Duchy, Arnaca.

It was the Archduke's hometown and also Harriet's.

At that question, Adelia shook her head.

"I apologize. I have not yet…"

At Adelia's words, the Archduke laughed.

"What's there to apologize for? It's understandable. We can visit it after the war."

Lately, Adelia had felt that the Archduke was acting a bit strange.

He was always stern and solemn, yet at the same time, kind and gentle.

But recently, something was different.

She felt that he smiled more often.

Was it because the end of the war was approaching?

As if he had been a man of unyielding pride despite his sternness and solemnity.

Now, he seemed like someone who had made up his mind about something.

In the end, the Archduke appeared to have brightened up compared to before.

Adelia couldn't know the details.

"Anyway, in Arunaria, not a single guard is used. There are very few attendants."

"Ah… I've heard. You've replaced them with automated golems."

"Yes."

As it wasn't a secret, Adelia naturally knew that much.

In the capital Arnaca, the White Palace Arunaria was guarded by automated golems.

It was natural for those with great power to prioritize protecting their possessions.

In Arunaria, human variables were perfectly controlled.

That's why it was a very safe but very lonely place, Adelia recalled hearing such a story once.

"These visions describe the method of automating those golems and building a kind of neural network for remote control."

"Ah, I see."

Now, the largest golem in the allied forces was the Titan.

But of course, the golem force was not limited to the Titan.

Steel golems made of iron chunks fought on the battlefield, moving instantaneously over short distances with teleportation magic.

Before Titan was deployed, and even after its deployment, golem forces continued to provide significant support.

The Archduke was now looking at a book that contained information on how to create an army of golems.

How to automate golems.

How to control them.

How to connect the golem army to a magical neural network, allowing remote manipulation.

It was all written there.

Thus, it was already applied technology, being used in actual combat.

Since the family's vision had already been applied, the Archduke was likely not seeing this book for the first time.

In a way, the Archduke was reviewing the material.

Adelia wanted to help the Archduke if she could.

"Have you found anything that needs to be improved?"

Magic crafting was also Adelia's talent. So, with the work related to Titan now complete, she felt a desire to do more.

Whatever it was.

If she could help, she wanted to help.

"No, not exactly."

However, the Archduke looked at Adelia as if that was not the case.

Was the Archduke re-examining the knowledge he already had because he had nothing else to do?

Adelia saw the Archduke as if he was contemplating something.

"I just wanted to consider the possibilities."

"Possibilities…?"

"The lack of guards in Arunaria could be a vulnerability."

"Vulnerability…?"

"Adelia, let's assume you could interfere with the neural network controlling the golems in Arunaria."

"Yes…?"

"Then, while outside of Arunaria, you could control the golems and essentially open and close all the doors of Arunaria, right?"

Seizing control of the golems.

"If that were possible, wouldn't the security of the palace be in the hands of a single mage?"

"If that were the case… it seems dangerous."

Arunaria's golems were connected by a network.

If the network were hijacked, all the golems would be taken away.

"I was thinking about whether such a thing is possible or not. It's just an untried idea… that's what I was thinking."

Arunaria was just an example.

The Archduke was talking about something entirely different.

But Adelia, who had no way of knowing that fact, contemplated.

There was already an established network of golems.

The act of intercepting and seizing control of the golems.

Was that possible?

"I'm not sure. But no one has ever tried it… that much seems certain."

"In the past, dispel-like methods were used to neutralize golems. But as I said, that's a thing of the past. There's no reason to create golems that can't resist dispel."

Golems were created because there were ways to deal with dispel. Resistance to magical interference is also part of golem technology.

However, not to neutralize but to interfere with the golem control neural network altogether.

The direction is different.

The Archduke was considering a magic that had never existed in the world before.

If such magic existed, it would be dangerous.

Not just a problem for Arunaria, but also for the golems currently operated by the Archduke, and even for Titan, which could be hijacked by someone.

An unthought-of idea has never been researched.

So, it suggested the possibility that this method might be surprisingly easy to

achieve.

Adelia wondered if the Duke was thinking about this to strengthen the defenses of Arunaria.

In any case, even if the Duke's worries were unfounded, they were still concerns.

She wanted to help if she could.

"Then I'll think about it as well…"

"Your Grace, Archduke."

Just as Adelia was about to say something, a voice called out to the Duke from outside the research facility.

"What's going on?"

One of the mages who entered the facility pointed outside with a serious expression.

"There's something you need to check."

It was not so much an urgent expression as it was an ambiguous one.

The Duke's sons were also at the scene.

"Father, you have arrived?"

"What's happening?"

Everyone seemed to be clueless.

"It's a golem."

"Yes."

A medium-sized iron golem lay in front of the gathered mages. The only inherent magic it possessed was the short-range teleportation ability, Blink.

However, it dominated the battlefield with its explosive physical strength. Although there were recently monsters that spewed superheated breath, this was one of the countless golems in the Duke's forces that reliably performed its duties.

Golems, like Titans, could be recovered and redeployed if their core system remained intact.

That's why the numbers of the Duke's golem forces did not decrease significantly.

"As you can see, it looks fine on the outside, but it won't reactivate at all. We recovered it after it was left behind in the last battle without its return magic activating, but we couldn't restore it."

"I see."

There was hardly any external damage. In fact, it seemed as if it had barely engaged in battle.

So, they recovered the seemingly intact golem that had stopped functioning and was left on the battlefield.

However, they called the Duke after they had brought it back and tried countless times to reactivate it without success.

The Duke examined the golem as his eldest son spoke.

But the Duke also furrowed his brow.

"The internal magic circuit is completely destroyed. No, not destroyed. The components are all intact."

The Duke seemed to understand why the other mages had called him.

"Is it possible for the embedded magic to simply 'evaporate'?"

He could understand if it was completely destroyed. But not only was there no external damage, even the internal components, such as the magic stones and devices, were in perfect condition.

Only the applied magic had been cleanly erased.

So, the Duke was now looking at a golem that had been destroyed in the strangest way possible.

"It seems like it was hit by a powerful dispel magic…"

The Duke had just said that his golems couldn't be affected by dispel-type neutralization magic.

Naturally, the monsters wouldn't use dispel magic. And even if they did, the Duke's golems wouldn't be affected by such neutralization magic.

Do the monsters now use magic as well?

Powerful dispel magic that can disable the Duke's golems?

Then what about the Titans?

What if it was not the golem but the Titan that had been affected by this unknown method?

If such an event had occurred, all the mages might have been in despair.

"May… may I take a look?"

While the Duke's expression was frozen, Adelia cautiously opened her mouth.

The other mages, as well as the Duke, stepped aside, and Adelia began to inspect the golem.

As the Duke had said, it was strangely and neatly damaged.

The crucial components and magic stones were all intact.

However, the magic circuit that allowed the golem to function as a golem was completely destroyed.

No, not destroyed. If it were destruction, there would be no traces to be found among the destroyed circuits.

It had disappeared as if someone had cleanly ripped out the entire magic circuit.

Was it possible for such a sophisticated and precise dispel, especially one that could neutralize a golem that already had countermeasures against dispels?

It had to be absurd for the Duke and his mages.

The most intact golem among the recovered ones was the most severely damaged.

Everyone was terrified at the thought that the monsters might use powerful dispel magic.

"Ah… I think I know what happened…"

But only Adelia had an intuition about what was going on.

After assuring the Duke that it wasn't a significant concern if her suspicions were correct, Adelia headed somewhere.

It was none other than a temple garrison, a Royal-class garrison.

Adelia had no choice but to know who the culprit was.

"The golem…? Me?"

"Do you remember?"

It was the red-haired girl, Scarlett.

CHAPTER 639

Adelia sought out Scarlett and asked her if she had ever neutralized a golem during the Wallen battle.

In the midst of battle, it was impossible to know everything that was happening around them.

However, occasionally, when Scarlett needed to terrify the soldiers or neutralize the magic-like power that the monsters used, she would utilize her own power.

Thus, Scarlett's Supernatural ability was more of a supportive ability rather than one that provided a direct advantage in battle.

Adelia thought it was entirely possible that a golem had appeared somewhere on the battlefield and had been disabled by the neutralizing wave that Scarlett had released.

When Adelia returned a short while later after saying she would bring someone, a red-haired girl accompanied her.

The girl had unique and beautiful flaming red hair and eyes.

However, the red-haired girl now bowed her head profusely.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

Not only the Archmage but also the other wizards were bewildered.

"I apologize… I made a mistake. I'll be more careful next time!"

Everyone was confused as they watched Scarlett trembling like an aspen tree, repeating her apologies.

Scarlett was not one of the well-known Supernaturals in the Temple.

While Supernaturals capable of large-scale destruction could easily gain fame on the battlefield, Scarlett's ability was not very efficient at destruction.

Of course, it was an undoubtedly unique ability. Therefore, within the Royal Class, they had even tested if Scarlett's ability could neutralize a gate.

Although the result was a failure, Scarlett indeed possessed an ability that went beyond the realm of neutralizing magic and Supernatural powers.

"Adelia. What happened?"

"Well… This is my friend, Scarlett… She's a Supernatural, and her ability is quite unique."

"What kind of Supernatural power is it?"

"It's an ability that nullifies all magic and Supernatural powers."

"…?"

It was an exceptionally peculiar ability, but their opponents were monsters.

Magic was not their main force, so Scarlett's ability did not receive much attention.

And those who knew even a little about Scarlett only knew that magic and Supernatural powers didn't work on her.

"Neutralization…"

The Archmage stared at Scarlett, who kept apologizing.

Supernatural abilities were inherently bizarre and grotesque, but a neutralizing Supernatural ability was undoubtedly a very strange one.

"You can rest assured that it wasn't the monsters who used Dispel."

Adelia had brought Scarlett to reassure the anxious Archmage. It was meant to convey that they didn't need to worry since the monsters hadn't neutralized the golem.

However, Adelia couldn't help but notice a strange look on the Archmage's face.

It was an expression as if he had discovered an unexpected answer in an entirely unexpected place.

"I'm sorry! I'll make sure this never happens again!"

"It's alright. The loss of one golem isn't a significant loss to our current forces. And golems are not human. Even if one was damaged, you didn't cause significant harm to anyone."

"But, still… still…"

"Didn't I say it's alright?"

The Archmage cautiously patted the trembling Scarlett's shoulder, assuring her that it was okay.

Of course, due to the Archmage's comforting gesture, Scarlett's expression gradually became more and more pained in real-time.

However, they had to be certain of what had transpired.

Snap!

The Archduke flicked his finger.

With that, a golem was summoned from thin air.

The Archduke looked at Scarlett and asked,

"Can you neutralize it?"

"Yes… Yes?"

Not just Scarlett, but the other mages and Adelia were taken aback by the sudden proposal.

"We need to know the extent of your power, so we can be cautious when using golems in the future."

"Ah… I see…”

As if she found the Archduke's words persuasive, Scarlett hesitated before approaching the summoned golem.

Scarlett cautiously approached the golem and placed her hand on its body.

It didn't take much time at all.

Thud!

The magic stone that powered the steel golem lost its light, and the golem came to a complete halt.

It wasn't destroyed or shattered into pieces.

The golem had simply stopped moving while still standing.

Snap!

The Archduke flicked his finger again.

He sent a few signals to the golem, but there was no response.

"I will check it."

Adelia approached the halted golem and started examining it.

"It's exactly the same."

"So, I really am the culprit…”

The golem, equipped with dispel countermeasures, had stopped functioning with just a touch of her hand.

It was an inexplicable sight even for the mages.

"Do you have to touch it to stop it?"

However, the Archduke asked something different.

"No? Ah, no… I don't think I necessarily have to."

The Archduke listened to Scarlett's story with a serious expression.

In the meantime, the Archduke's eldest son, who had been silent, cautiously chimed in.

"But, if she misuses her power… could it neutralize the Titan as well?"

The atmosphere froze at his words.

This was the Archduke's workshop.

Not only Titan's components but also the Archduke's golems were stored here.

If Scarlett misused her power even once, it meant that the Archduke's entire force could be neutralized in an instant.

Just like the deactivated golem, the Titan could suffer the same fate.

An overwhelming dispel ability that indiscriminately erased all magical power within its range.

Scarlett's ability should be regarded as such a bizarre type.

Scarlett, as if she had heard something unimaginable, began to tremble with a shocked expression.

Of course, it would only be possible if Scarlett intended to do so.

Not just the Archduke's mages but also Adelia started to feel uneasy, realizing what kind of being they had brought into the workshop.

"I'll disappear quickly!"

Adelia watched dumbfounded as Scarlett turned around and sprinted away from the Archduke's workshop.

"Upon reflection, it was indeed a grave mistake… I apologize…"

Of course, Scarlett wouldn't do such a thing, and the Titan wasn't nearby either, but it was undeniably dangerous to bring Scarlett here.

Scarlett's power was, in a way, more dangerous to their allies than to monsters.

"I never imagined that Scarlett's power had already reached that level…"

They had witnessed a golem being neutralized right in front of them.

No matter how powerful the magic, no matter how great the magic.

Scarlett could erase magic if she so wished.

It was only after Adelia saw it with her own eyes that she realized how powerful and dangerous that power was.

“Huff, huff… huff…”

Scarlett hurriedly rushed back to the royal-class garrison in one breath.

Scarlett didn't particularly rely on her Supernatural powers. They had hardly ever been helpful in battle anyway.

However, there were rare instances when she used her powers during combat to save allies who had been mentally subdued by monsters.

But an incident occurred where the Duke's golem became useless after being caught in her power.

Scarlett couldn't help but be surprised and flustered by this event. Golems certainly roamed the battlefield, and until now, there had never been a case where a golem was caught in Scarlett's power. There was no need or reason for Scarlett's Supernatural power to be activated at all times during battle.

In a way, both the golem and Scarlett were unlucky for this to happen.

It was an event caused by terrible timing.

Not only did she run hastily, but Scarlett was also so shocked that her whole body was drenched in cold sweat.

She had unwittingly rendered a golem powerless.

Alright, let's call that an accident.

'But… if this child misuses her power… wouldn't it be possible for the Titan to be neutralized as well?'

But as Scarlett recalled the last words she heard, her mind seemed to grow distant.

The Titan was an indispensable force for the allied forces at the moment.

Scarlett couldn't help but be grateful that such an event hadn't happened so far when she thought that if she had used her power incorrectly, the Titan could have become a literal mountain-sized tin can.

The Titan had only been deployed twice on the battlefield so far, and since the Titan was not initially on the allied side but rather dropped in the middle of enemy territory, there was no possibility of such an event occurring. However, the mere fact that such an event was possible was a huge shock to Scarlett.

If her mistake led to the Titan's neutralization, her life wouldn't be enough to atone for that sin.

Only then did Scarlett realize that she possessed a power that was more dangerous to her allies than to her enemies.

A Supernatural who is more dangerous to allies.

She had already caused significant trouble by neutralizing a single golem.

The possibility was slim, but still, just the possibility of having a negative impact on the Titan led Scarlett to a decision.

'I shouldn't be here.'

Once she became aware of the danger of her abilities, Scarlett's best choice was to withdraw from the battlefield as soon as possible.

Before causing an irreversible accident rather than having the potential to help.

It's better not to have a dangerous power on the battlefield at this point when the end of the Gate incident isn't far off.

It was not a cowardly decision to survive. She couldn't cause more harm.

First, she needed to find Teacher Mustlang.

He would surely send her back if she explained the situation.

Just as Scarlett was about to look for the command post of the royal-class garrison with that thought in mind.

“What's wrong? Why are you sweating like that?”

Anna approached with a serious expression, seeing Scarlett, who was not only pale but also drenched in sweat.

"Should I give you a fatigue recovery potion? I have some that Christina gave me…”

Christina, a master of alchemy, always kept simple remedies such as fever reducers, pain relievers, and fatigue recovery potions on hand in her barracks. Anna looked at Scarlett, as if to say that she would give her one if needed.

In response to the question about whether she wanted one of those potions, Scarlett shook her head.

"No, no. Anna, it's not that. I'm fine."

"You're fine…? Is there something else going on?"

Anna looked at Scarlett with a serious expression, as if she were worried.

"Um… well… I think I shouldn't stay here any longer…”

"Why is that?"

Not knowing what to say to anyone.

"In fact, during the last Wallen battle…”

Scarlett began to tell a story that should not have been told, to a person who should not have heard it.

How she had unwittingly disabled a golem.

She had been called to the Royal Barracks just now and confirmed that she had disabled the golem, and on a whim, she had destroyed another one.

She couldn't stay here any longer because, if she made a mistake, she might even destroy Titan.

When Scarlett finished her explanation,

"Ah…”

Anna looked at Scarlett with a meaningful expression and nodded quietly.

"That could happen…”

Scarlett saw the look in Anna's eyes.

"That could happen…”

Anna De Gerna, always gloomy, somehow made Scarlett feel uncomfortable whenever they conversed.

The talented girl in dark magic grabbed Scarlett's shoulder.

"Scarlett…”

"Yes?"

"Don't tell anyone about this."

"Yes…? Don't tell?"

"Don't tell, especially…”

Anna looked around as if she were biting her lip.

It seemed dangerous, as if she were trying to hypnotize Scarlett.

"Don't ever tell Christina."

"What? Anna, I don't understand what you're saying…"

Scarlett couldn't help but be confused by Anna's unexpected words.

When Scarlett asked why, Anna moved her face closer.

As the deep, dark black eyes approached, Scarlett couldn't help but swallow nervously.

It felt threatening.

"If I say don't tell, don't tell."

Scarlett felt cornered by the sudden pressure.

She didn't provide any explanation or reason, just insisted on not telling.

However, Scarlett could feel the fear hidden in the depths of Anna's eyes.

"What are you two doing?"

And then, someone's voice came from behind.

Anna's face turned pale at the familiar voice.

When they turned around, Christina, wearing a colorful apron stained from working with alchemy potions, was approaching.

"What's going on? What secret conversation are you having that you're whispering like that?"

Christina smirked ominously and playfully tapped Anna's side.

"Oh, it's not that. It's just that… Scarlett didn't look well…"

"Huh? Scarlett, you're not feeling well? That's right, why are you sweating so much?"

Scarlett had no idea what was happening. Christina approached Scarlett and touched her sweat-drenched forehead.

What did the fact she just learned have to do with Christina?

Christina's touch, asking if she was in pain or if she should bring medicine or call a priest, only conveyed concern for her friend.

But Anna was trembling.

She didn't know why.

"Anna, what's wrong with you? You look even worse."

Naturally, Christina found Anna's appearance more peculiar.

Christina stared intently at Anna.

There seemed to be no problem with Christina's calm behavior and attitude.

The one who looked strange was actually Anna.

Scarlett couldn't understand why she was acting like this.

"No… I think I might be catching a cold…"

"A summer cold that even a dog wouldn't catch? You should cover yourself properly with a blanket when you sleep."

"Uh-huh… I should…"

"Wait, I have a tonic I made. I'll give one to both of you."

Christina headed towards her barracks with a brisk walk.

What could possibly be the problem with her offering a tonic to her sick friends?

"Anna…? Why are you acting like this…?"

"Go back."

Without any explanation, Anna tightly held Scarlett's hand.

"Hurry, go back quickly. Don't tell anyone about what just happened, don't tell anyone at all. Hurry and go back."

Scarlett was already planning on doing that even if Anna hadn't told her.

"You shouldn't be here."

Scarlett couldn't understand why Anna was acting like this.

She couldn't figure out the reason, and Anna didn't say anything more.

CHAPTER 640

Anna told her to leave without saying anything, but there was no one who could simply turn back from the battlefield without reason.

Unless one had suffered an injury as severe as Ludwig, they couldn't receive permission to leave. Leaving forcibly would naturally result in desertion charges.

Anna had merely told Scarlett that she shouldn't be here without providing a proper explanation.

Fortunately, Scarlett knew very well that Anna, despite her gloomy and dark side, was not a person of ill character.

There was no way Anna would say such a thing without reason.

Therefore, Scarlett spoke to her teacher, Mr. Mustlang, who was in charge of her education and now served as her military officer.

She said she was too exhausted and tormented, that she wanted to give up on everything.

She asked to be sent to the temple.

She said she felt like she would cause an accident if she stayed on the battlefield any longer, like a bomb that would only explode among her own troops.

Scarlett never mentioned Anna's reason for saying such things.

She believed there must have been a reason Anna had told her not to tell Christina.

There had to have been a reason for Anna's desperate look in her eyes.

Of course, Mr. Mustlang couldn't help but be taken aback.

Scarlett, who had silently done her duties without complaint, suddenly said she was tired and wanted to be sent home. Naturally, he was surprised.

It was like playing hooky.

A soldier asking to be sent home in the middle of a war—how would that ever work? In reality, there were countless soldiers who appealed with such feelings.

And if all of them could return home as they wished, the alliance would cease to exist.

While some may want to stay for the sake of the military-provided meals, those who had experienced the fear of death would naturally want to give up on everything.

That's why Scarlett couldn't just ask to be sent home without reason.

But the important thing was, Scarlett was not an ordinary student.

As a member of the Temple Royal Class, she had accumulated much more experience than ordinary soldiers.

And Mr. Mustlang misunderstood Scarlett.

He thought that although she had been silently doing well up to this point, she was still burdened and struggling like everyone else.

He guessed that, even though she hadn't expressed it, her heart ached so much that it had finally burst forth like this.

"Alright, Scarlett, you've been through a lot. I'll speak to the higher-ups on your behalf. With everything you've done, you should be able to go home and rest. Leave the remaining work to the others. Don't feel guilty. You've done enough. You've been through a lot."

"Teacher…"

That's why Mr. Mustlang comforted Scarlett with such words.

Although there was a proper reason, she couldn't say it. So, in response to her seemingly childish request to go home, Mr. Mustlang embraced her warmly. In his arms, Scarlett couldn't help but burst into tears.

So, in the end…

Scarlett was able to return to the Imperial Capital via the warp spot without giving a proper explanation.

Because of that, she couldn't even say a proper goodbye to her friends.

Only Anna's words.

Her words telling her to leave quickly without saying anything.

She believed there had to have been a meaning behind those words.

Ordinarily, the return of a single soldier from the military wouldn't have been such a significant event.

However, in the Royal Class, where the numbers were small overall, the sudden absence of someone could not go unnoticed.

Thus, it was inevitable that there would be some commotion when Scarlett, who had performed her duties well thus far and seemed to have no issues, left without a word or greeting.

The marching troop halted momentarily for a meal break.

"Scarlett's returned? All of a sudden?"

Ranian Sesor, eating a hardtack, cocked his head upon hearing the news from Kono Lint.

"She wasn't around, so I thought something happened, but it turns out she went back."

Kono Lint, who curiously observed everything happening around him without much significance, was the first to notice Scarlett's absence.

"Is something wrong?"

"Well, I don't know. She doesn't talk much, so she might have been keeping it all inside."

Erich, who could never have a good relationship with Scarlett due to past grudges, also looked displeased.

Both had crossed too many lines to discuss their past torment. They had both become very different people from their past selves.

However, the lingering guilt and grudges did not simply disappear.

Erich ate his hardtack with a stern expression upon hearing the news of Scarlett being escorted back.

As it was a rest during the march, they had to eat preserved food in a bivouac without a mess hall, so everyone huddled together, sitting closely.

"I thought she looked sick, but if even the priests have a hard time treating her, isn't it serious? If she has to go all the way back to the capital…"

Christina remembered Scarlett's pale appearance just yesterday and sighed.

If even the holy power of the priests couldn't heal her, it was understandable why Scarlett had to leave.

Anna remained silent, quietly eating her bread without adding or contributing anything to the conversation.

After all, there weren't many people left.

Ludwig and Ellen had been taking their meals separately for a while now, not showing up at the table.

Heinrich had been moving more frequently with the Kernstadt army lately.

In Evia's case, she was serving as a messenger for the command post, so it was the hardest to see her face compared to the others.

Thus, nearly all the Royal Class second-year students were missing.

All that remained were Louis, Anna, Christina, Adelia, Kono Lint, Erich, Cayer, Cliffman, and Ranian Sesor.

The twenty-two students, who once combined classes A and B, were now reduced to this small number.

"Where did she feel sick?" Lint asked.

Christina nodded her head.

"It didn't look serious, so I gave her a tonic, but it must not have worked?"

Anna tried to silence Scarlett.

And indeed, Scarlett had followed Anna's incomprehensible instructions to the letter.

Unfortunately, Scarlett had only spoken about the archduke's golem, not who had taken her to the archduke's fortress.

"Hm? It's probably not because she's sick. You don't need to worry about that."

Anna was unaware that she would also have to silence Adelia to keep the secret.

At Adelia's sudden remark, Anna's eyes widened. Anna stared at Adelia with a desperate gaze.

But no words could be spoken through her eyes alone.

"If it's not because she's sick, then what is it?"

"Ah, well, the truth is…"

Anna could only bite her lip and watch as Adelia opened her mouth to speak.

After Adelia had finished explaining everything, Christina's eyes were wide with shock.

The others shared her astonishment.

Scarlett's power of immunity could neutralize other powers.

Upon realizing that Scarlett might have accidentally neutralized Titan, everyone couldn't help but be flabbergasted.

A power that was potentially more dangerous to their allies.

Everyone nodded dumbly, unable to argue with Adelia's claim that Scarlett had to hastily retreat.

"That's why I joined the march today to see if Scarlett really returned."

Everyone accepted this explanation.

It couldn't be helped if that was the reason, rather than her being injured.

Louis, too, listened to the story with a drained expression.

However, Christina's reaction was slightly different.

"Ah… I see…?"

As if she had discovered something.

As if she had confirmed something.

Adelia didn't know what it was, but the look in Christina's eyes was enough to send shivers down her spine.

With a meaningful smile, Christina shifted her gaze from Adelia.

At the end of her gaze was Anna.

"I wondered what the secret talk was about…"

Anna's eyes were downcast, trembling. Louis Ancton stared at her blankly as well.

"Secret talk? What's that?"

At Adelia's question, Christina smiled.

"No, it's nothing."

"…"

Adelia felt a strange sense of unease from Christina's demeanor, but she couldn't pinpoint its origin.

A short while later.

Just before the army set out, Christina sat on a rock.

Louis was at a loss for words in this situation, and Anna stood before Christina.

"Christina, it's not like that…"

"Like what?"

Christina cocked her head.

"You purposely hid facts we should know?"

At Christina's words, Anna couldn't say anything in response.

"Did you think I would do something bad to Scarlett if I knew? So you just trembled?"

Anna shuddered even more at Christina's blunt words. Christina got up from the rock and approached Anna, who was bowing her head.

Standing in front of the bowed Anna, Christina bent down even further to forcefully meet Anna's downcast gaze.

"I can't help but think you're treating me like a madwoman, but you know I didn't do all this on my own, right?"

Watching Anna tightly close her eyes, Christina whispered.

"I don't know whether it's stranger for the one who did the crazy things and went mad, or for the one who did the crazy things and pretends like they've done nothing. Anna."

They created the Immortal together.

Deciding to join hands with the Black Order was also a joint decision.

"You're not going to say you want to stop now, are you? You're not going to say you want to quit after coming this far…?"

"…"

"Why do you seem to be pretending like you have nothing to do with this lately…?"

"I… Christina…"

"Isn't that the worst thing…?"

As Anna seemed to be on the verge of tears, Louis pulled her towards himself and away from Christina.

"Enough. Anna must have… had her reasons too."

"Why, do you think I would try to harm Scarlett if I found out about this? Because Scarlett can neutralize the Immortal?"

The anger, malice, and madness in those eyes made Louis feel as if his heart would skip a beat just by meeting them.

"Christina, that's not what I meant."

"…"

"Calm down. We need to calm down."

At Louis' serious and restrained words, Christina clenched her teeth.

As if trying to suppress something.

As if forcibly pressing down something that couldn't be pressed down.

After a brief moment, Christina exhaled her breath as if spitting it out.

"…Fine, I might have been too harsh. I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, Christina. I just… I thought it would be bad if more people found out…"

However, Anna had insisted that Christina must never find out about Scarlett.

Knowing she was lying, Anna couldn't help but tremble at her fingertips.

"I don't want to hurt Scarlett. There's no way I would do that. It doesn't make sense for me to do this if I were to hurt Scarlett in the process. If I were to hurt my friend, that's impossible. It would be absurd. Of course."

It was because she might be able to save her friend.

It was with that thought that she had taken on these tasks.

If she ended up hurting her friend by being consumed by the task, it would be no different than denying everything.

At Christina's rational words, Anna eventually began to shake and cry.

"I'm sorry, I was so scared… I was just so, so scared and anxious…"

Christina carefully approached Anna and began to comfort her.

"I know. I know I've lost it a bit. No, not a bit, quite a lot. I admit it. I do. I don't think I'm sane either. Of course, it's no wonder you're so worried. It's inevitable. Yeah. Yeah."

"Sniff… Sob… Ugh…"

"I admit it. I must have been a weak person. Not strong like you, who can still think properly after going through all this. I'm weak… It's because I'm weak that I became like this."

That she had gone mad because she was weak.

Christina knew that Louis and Anna were stronger than her, which is why they could still be rational.

She was broken because she was weak.

She had gone mad because she was weak.

What someone else could endure was something she couldn't.

The truth that someone else could accept was something she couldn't.

However, being mad didn't necessarily mean being irrational.

"But… You know. There are traitors in the Alliance."

"…"

"…"

"It's been several months since the Holy Knight Order switched sides. Wouldn't the other side have switched too? That would be too optimistic."

Through Ludwig, they had learned that the Five Great Religions had become the Demon King's.

At this point, several months later, the Demon King would have increased the number of traitors.

Perhaps a third.

Perhaps half.

Or maybe everyone except them.

It was possible that they had already become enemies.

"We may not be the only ones who know about Scarlett's power. There's bound to be people who will try to use Scarlett somehow. And the Demon King already knew about Scarlett's abilities from the beginning."

The fact that Scarlett's abilities could be used in that way.

From the start, Reinhardt had known about Scarlett's abilities.

But if they discovered that her power could neutralize the Immortal in the same way

it neutralized the golems?

"I don't want to hurt Scarlett."

"…"

"We have to protect Scarlett."

The Demon King would try to use Scarlett.

So they had to protect her.

"That's why I was angry. Not because I hated you."

Anna tried to wipe her tears and looked up into Christina's eyes.

To apologize for not telling her an important fact because they had to protect Scarlett.

"You understand my feelings… right?"

However, in those eyes, it was hard to say that it stemmed from concern for a friend.

They were too dark and revealed ominous shadows.

CHAPTER 641

It didn't take long for Scarlett to return to the Imperial Capital.

A large-scale warp spot was always in operation for supplies, so as soon as she received permission, Scarlett was able to return to the Imperial Capital immediately.

Though the distance was incredibly vast, with a mass teleport cast by several Archmages, people and supplies could come and go at any time.

Some had returned to the Imperial Capital during the winter, but it was Scarlett's first time returning to the temple since the coalition forces had set out.

In fact, most of the battle-capable personnel from the temple had been roaming the battlefield, so there were hardly any cases of them returning to the temple.

"Hoo…"

-Thunk

After coming back and taking a shower, Scarlett collapsed onto the bed as if crumbling.

Scarlet could feel that the end of the Gate incident was not far off.

Her sense of crisis grew bigger as well.

The anxiety of whether she could survive until everything was over was always present. Scarlett was incomparably strong compared to ordinary people, but because of that, she had faced countless life-threatening situations.

Therefore, she had no certainty that she could survive until the end.

However, everything suddenly came to an end.

She wasn't injured, and the Gate incident hadn't ended yet.

Her abilities posed a danger to her allies.

So, she didn't know if staying on the battlefield would actually cause more problems.

"…"

Lying face down on the bed, Scarlett lay there as if dead, staring blankly.

Scarlett knew that the coalition forces wouldn't have a significant problem if she were gone, just as it had been in the past.

There was theTitan, and some strange armies with unknown identities.

Would the battle end like this?

Though many unresolved issues remained, was the battle against the unidentified monsters coming to a conclusion?

Scarlett knew that all of this would eventually end in either death or survival.

However, it was sudden.

She had never thought that her battle would end so abruptly, and honestly, Scarlett was in a daze.

It didn't feel real.

Truly, without any warning, everything happened so suddenly.

Now she could rest.

And those words.

The ones she had heard from Anna.

What was the story that she should never tell Christina?

What did it mean?

For now, she did as Anna asked because her gaze looked so desperate, but Scarlett

couldn't help but feel uneasy.

Trusting Anna meant that she didn't trust Christina.

Once everything was over, she would ask about it.

It might not be a big deal after all.

Scarlett suddenly realized while lying on the bed.

The smell of the soft quilt was unfamiliar.

How long had she been wandering outside for the dormitory bed, quilt, and the room's scenery to feel so unfamiliar?

Her days of roaming the streets as a beggar now felt like a distant past.

The war had swallowed everything, and everything before the war had faded.

Everything felt like a distant past, and all the things that had once been familiar now seemed strange.

She had clung to the temple because she couldn't survive outside of it.

But now, Scarlett could live outside the temple as well.

Even if the war ended, there would still be work to do in clearing out the remaining monsters on the continent.

There was a use for Scarlett's sword wherever it was needed, and it was needed everywhere in the world. Scarlett could now survive even without the temple.

Scarlett rose from the bed and gazed quietly at the familiar yet unfamiliar scenery.

Temple Royal Class Dormitory, second floor.

The landscape turned green as summer approached.

Could the temple start anew?

Too many had died, with countless students among the deceased.

Scarlet should have been in her fifth year.

However, everything had come to a halt during her second year.

The dormitory, the education, the scenery.

Everything had stopped and refused to flow.

"…”

Could humanity ever regain its original tranquility?

Suddenly, Scarlett felt a profound sadness.

It seemed nearly impossible for the temple to operate again.

Even if it did resume operations,

those who had already vanished would never return, no matter what happened.

Asher.

Delphin.

The two could not come back.

Even if the temple miraculously resumed classes, their empty spots would remain empty forever.

Even if peace returned to the world, the countless empty spaces left by such people would never be filled.

Scarlett finally bit her lip and began to cry softly.

In the end, Delphin's face, who had died in her stead, surfaced in her mind, and Scarlett buried her face between her knees and wept for a long time.

Was it okay to be alive?

Scarlett felt she could somewhat understand the feelings of Ludwig, who had been forced to retreat from the battlefield.

It didn't seem like this was the end.

It felt like there was something more she could do.

Ludwig, who had finally undergone some sort of treatment and returned to the battlefield with an unhealthy body, wrapped a bandage around his arm, insisting that rear support was enough.

Scarlett could somewhat understand his feelings.

While others were still risking their lives, it weighed on her heart to be back here, regardless of any justifiable reason.

However, Scarlett's situation was quite different from Ludwig's.

While Ludwig's situation was due to insufficient strength, Scarlett's presence on the battlefield would cause problems.

She had even more reason to withdraw from the battlefield than Ludwig did.

Scarlett knew better than anyone that it was inevitable.

But like Ludwig, Scarlett was not someone who could become complacent, claiming she had no more battles to fight.

Somehow, her heart felt tormented and uncomfortable.

Scarlett stared intently at her own hands.

She thought about her supernatural ability.

What a useless power it was.

In fact, it wasn't exactly a useless ability.

Her power had its uses ever since monsters began using strange powers.

However, the number of monsters that used magic-like powers wasn't very high among the various types of monsters. And since most of them possessed overwhelming physical strength, her ability often lacked significance.

Thus, her supernatural ability was merely a supplementary tool, and she couldn't rely on it alone.

Moreover, her ability had now reached the point where it could neutralize even the magic equipment affected by her powers.

Her ability's development had become a problem.

Fortunately, she could control it consciously.

It was an immense relief that her ability didn't completely nullify magic, allowing teleportation spells to still function.

If it had been that extreme, she would have had to walk back alone from the faraway location to Imperial Capital.

To the enemy, it was a meaningless ability, a supernatural power that neutralized the allied golems and magical equipment.

If it had been a battle between humans, Scarlett knew her power would have been of immense help.

The enemy's mages would not have been able to lay a finger on Scarlett.

However, in a battle against monsters, it was of little significance.

Of course, that didn't mean Scarlett wanted to participate in such a fight.

It was a useless power, but it was good to be useless.

A power that neutralized magic and supernatural abilities.

Scarlett sneered to herself.

Her childhood, when she had been ostracized as a witch, now seemed absurd.

In reality, she was the furthest thing from a witch.

She couldn't even use magic, nor was she affected by it.

Having red hair and red eyes had subjected her to ridicule and torment, and now those days seemed ridiculous and lonely.

In the end, Scarlett left the battlefield.

Her ability was harmful to her allies, but upon further thought, there was nothing she could do about it.

'Yeah…… '

Scarlett thought quietly.

'For someone like me, it's better to be useless…… '

Depending on one's perspective, it was a strong ability, but it was better if it wasn't used too much.

Such power.

She wished for the war to end and for a world where people could live in peace, even if things couldn't go back to the way they were before.

That's what she hoped for.

As she thought so, she decided to sleep deeply for the first time in a long while.

-Meow

"…?"

Scarlet turned her head at the sound coming from beyond the window.

It was definitely a cat's cry.

'What is it?'

A cat's cry.

Outside the window.

A cat was sitting on the windowsill outside Scarlett's dormitory, crying.

It was a cat that Scarlett knew.

The cat was looking at her and crying.

"Ah."

Scarlett finally remembered the forgotten existence.

Ellen had gone back to the dormitory for a moment, claiming she had left a cat behind.

Since then, Ellen had hardly left her barracks, so they hadn't had a chance to talk, but it seemed certain that she had left a cat.

So, that black cat must have been living in the dormitory all this time.

-Meow

-Knock Knock

The cat knocked on the window with its paw as if asking her to open it.

Ellen had a cat.

Scarlett had seen Ellen take it with her. She had seen it struggling while locked in a cage.

It wasn't strange for a cat to be around.

-Meow

-Knock Knock

But there was something strange.

"This is the second floor, isn't it……?"

This was the second floor of the dormitory.

And the floor height was higher than that of an ordinary building, so the second floor of the dormitory was much higher than that of a normal building.

How on earth could a cat be up there?

Scarlett couldn't help but be baffled as she looked at the cat.

Anyway.

She didn't know how the cat had managed to get up there, but if it jumped down carelessly and got hurt, that would be a big problem.

Could that be the case?

The cat had managed to climb up there, but it didn't know how to get back down and was in trouble.

But that cat.

Scarlett had seen it since it was a kitten, but why hadn't it grown at all?

Was it a slow-growing breed?

Scarlett had various thoughts as she cautiously opened the window, worried that it might be dangerous.

-With a start

Along with the sound.

With a leap, the cat dashed into Scarlett's room.

However.

-Thunk!

As it happened.

“…!”

The cat that entered Scarlett's room had transformed into a human.

“Ah…?”

That's what happens with humans.

If they're too shocked, they can only stammer incoherently and their mouths gape open.

Utterly speechless.

“Ah… Ah…? Ah…”

Scarlett was too shocked.

Afraid.

And, appalled.

As she struggled to find words,

“I'll ask quickly. I'm in a hurry.”

The cat turned human.

“You, before coming here. So, from yesterday until now.”

To be precise, the cat that had taken on Reinhardt's form asked,

“Christina.”

“Louie Ancton.”

“Anna de Gerna.”

“Ludwig.”

The cute cat was gone, replaced by the stern-faced Reinhardt.

That despicable and bad-tempered Reinhardt.

“Have you met any of these four people?”

He skipped any explanation and went straight to the point.

Naturally, Scarlett wasn't in any condition to respond, let alone think.

-Thunk

“Ah… Ah… Aaah…”

Unable to say anything, Scarlet collapsed on the spot.

“Please… Spare me…”

As if understanding why she was reacting this way, Reinhardt furrowed his brow while looking down at the cowering Scarlett.

“Hey, I don't know if you're aware, but we're in a damn hurry. Hurry up!”

Though it was urgent,

Still, he didn't explain.

However, the Demon King's face turned red as he looked down at Scarlet.

Certainly, there was no trace of anger that might indicate he was furious.

“If you can't answer quickly, at least put on some clothes first!”

“!!!!!”

On top of that, Scarlett had just finished showering and fallen onto the bed, so she was in her underwear.

Scarlett almost fainted.

The world-renowned intruder who broke into Scarlett's room turned red and urged her to put on clothes if she couldn't answer the questions. Trembling, Scarlett hurriedly dressed herself.

He barged into her room without permission and even gave orders.

The Demon King really was a bastard.

Scarlett wasn't even embarrassed; she was just bewildered by the situation unfolding before her and curled up in the corner, shaking.

What was with the cat?

And the Demon King?

What about the questions?

What had happened up until now?

If the cat was actually the Demon King,

What on earth had been going on?

Scarlett shivered, huddled in the corner, unable to open her mouth.

Regrettably, the problem wasn't only with Scarlett.

“I… I didn't mean to look on purpose. But, um. Anyway. I'm in a hurry. I'm sorry. I'm also in a rush. I know there's no excuse, I know…”

The Demon King seemed to be aware of what he had done and was rambling on.

What did it matter if he saw her in her underwear?

Considering the state of the world, this was nothing. And here he was apologizing for it.

Scarlett was only scared by the fact that the Demon King had suddenly appeared in

her room.

Scarlett had seen her fair share of hardships after the war.

However, in this entirely bizarre moment, with the Demon King she should never have encountered right in front of her, her mind went blank.

The Demon King was frightening.

However, as much as she looked, the rambling Demon King appeared embarrassed and awkward, but not murderous.

"Are… are you not going to kill me?"

"Why would I kill you!" Reinhardt snapped back, almost madly.

"I know you must be feeling confused, scared, and curious about why I've been doing all of this, and you probably don't trust me. I get it, I understand. But try to calm down, even though it's confusing."

He was even more so than before.

But, Scarlett couldn't help but think as she looked at Reinhardt.

He seemed even crazier than before, but he looked just like he did back in the temple.

He was always a ruffian, then and now.

Scarlett's trembling slowly subsided.

He didn't intend to kill her.

If he didn't have that intention, then why on earth was he here?

"What on earth are you doing…?"

"Hey, when I hear something like that, there are so many things that come to mind that I can't figure out what exactly you're curious about. You need to be more specific."

Was she talking about the gate incident?

Was she asking what he had done up until now?

Or was she asking about the current situation?

He had done so many things that it was impossible to tell what she was asking if she asked ambiguously.

Scarlett gestured toward the window.

"The… cat?"

"Yes…"

Though there were certainly more pressing matters, Scarlett was disoriented and wanted to know what was going on.

Regardless of the importance of the matter, the fact that the Demon King was masquerading as a cat was the most intriguing.

"This is… um… actually the most complicated part…?"

And for Reinhardt too, explaining the other matters was quite complex and difficult, but explaining the cat impersonation was the hardest.

From the original intention to how it had come to be, it would take at least 30 minutes to explain.

As Reinhardt stuttered, Scarlett quietly asked the most important question.

"Does Ellen… know…?"

"No, she doesn't."

"…"

Despite the terror of the situation.

Despite the fear of the other party.

"You crazy… perverted bastard…”

Scarlett couldn't help but frown.

"I… I mean, you're right! You're right, but I should be getting scolded by Ellen, not you! Why should I be scolded by you?! Call me a pervert for that other thing instead!"

"You shameless… piece of trash…”

Regardless of anything else, the act of deceiving people as a cat was an indisputable perverted act, even if he had ten mouths to speak with.

“…Fine, I deserve to die."

The Demon King had no choice but to admit it.

CHAPTER 642

Scarlett cursed at the Demon King and then found herself surprised by her own actions.

This was the first time she had ever cursed in her life.

That's why she couldn't help but be startled.

She would never have said such a thing if the person before her had been the Demon King.

And so, she realized that she was thinking of the person in front of her not as the Demon King, but as Reinhardt.

No matter how she looked at it, he hadn't changed much from the Reinhardt she knew from their time at the temple.

Except, perhaps, that he had become more of a rascal.

Of course, she had been afraid of Reinhardt even back then.

It was a fear mixed with admiration, to be precise.

But in the end, Scarlett couldn't understand the situation at all.

At this very moment.

Why did this happen to her?

What did she do to deserve this?

Just as Scarlett was confused by the unresolved situation, so was Reinhardt.

He seemed to understand that the situation was bizarre and that Scarlett had no choice but to be flustered, which Scarlett could sense clearly.

Setting aside all other emotions, Scarlett could distinctly feel one thing.

The Demon King was extremely anxious.

He tried to calm Scarlett down while constantly glancing out the window.

"Alright… No, it's not alright, but just ask quickly. I know that you won't believe me just because of what I've said. I'll try to explain as much as I can. I'll tell you everything…"

"No."

Scarlett was bewildered and afraid.

She slowly calmed her startled heart and took several deep breaths.

However, she asked about the cat first because that was what she was most curious about.

But she didn't really need to ask about the other problems.

"I called you a pervert and shameless, but I didn't say I didn't trust you."

"…Huh?"

She was bewildered, surprised, and afraid.

But when it came to trust, Scarlett didn't distrust him.

On the day the Gate incident occurred.

Scarlett wasn't there.

But in another place.

In the underground prison where the Demon King was imprisoned.

"I remember it clearly."

Scarlett remembered the Demon King, who was pouring out all the truth with

sorrow back then.

Not knowing if the Demon King would use a curse, Bertus had brought Scarlett along to interrogate Reinhardt.

The Emperor, Saviolin Turner, and even Scarlett hadn't believed the Demon King's words at that time.

I wished for peace.

I wanted to save everyone.

I knew the future.

All those words had sounded like the ramblings of a madman.

Even back then, when the Demon King claimed to have created the world.

"I trust you."

Scarlett remembered it clearly.

Those who knew the truth were silent because they knew the truth.

Scarlett was one of those who knew the truth but had dismissed it as nonsense at the time.

However, now she knew that the emptiness and sadness in his eyes, which seemed as though he had lost everything, were not a pretense but the actual truth.

Even the Demon King had said that if they couldn't trust him, they should kill him before everything went wrong.

If they had followed the Demon King's words and beheaded him, then hung his head in the street, would the Gate incident have been avoided? That was something they could never know now.

But she knew that if they had trusted and released the Demon King, the Gate incident

wouldn't have happened.

She knew that the despair and sadness she felt from the Demon King were not feigned but as genuine as they appeared.

Scarlett knew then that all the words of the Demon King, which had been considered lies at the time, were true.

She knew about Akasha as well.

But even if Scarlett believed the words of the Demon King, there was nothing she could change.

She was only there according to the needs of important people.

And after everything had happened, she was one of the silent ones, knowing that telling the truth to people would have no meaning.

Scarlett did what she could.

She believed that silently killing monsters and saving people was the best she could do.

So, without saying a word about the Demon King, Scarlett simply did what she had to do.

Revealing the truth to people was not her domain.

She grieved and sympathized with the Demon King's existence.

She was simply where she needed to be.

So, Scarlett had no reason to ask about things like the Gate incident from the beginning.

She already knew.

The Demon King didn't need to ramble on, saying it would be difficult for her to believe him.

She already believed.

It was just that trusting the Demon King and fearing him were two different matters.

"Don't tell me… you think I came to seek revenge on you?"

"Um… yes…"

It was possible that he had come to take revenge on those who didn't believe him back then.

The Demon King might have held a grudge against those who didn't believe him, as their disbelief led to the world turning out this way, and Scarlett was one of them.

Only then did she realize why she had been trembling, even though she believed in him, fearing that she might be killed.

"Why would I do that? It was only natural that you didn't believe me back then. I have no intention of doing that, and I don't resent you."

"I see… Alright…"

From the way he insisted he wouldn't kill her, Scarlett couldn't help but know that he didn't hold any grudge.

Reinhardt was still the same.

He was the Demon King but not very much like one.

He was still just a person with few opportunities.

He was still just as bewildering.

Believing in him was one thing, but she wasn't an important person.

Why had he come to see her?

Why did he ask if she had seen her friends?

Reinhardt struggled to figure out how to persuade Scarlett, only to realize there was

no need to persuade her in the first place.

Scarlett was just too surprised. She just needed time to calm down.

There was no need to go into great detail. She had already heard everything before.

Scarlett just needed time to calm down.

"Now that I've calmed down a bit, please tell me slowly what's so urgent…"

"Wait."

Just as they were about to have a proper conversation, Reinhardt's expression hardened as he looked towards the window.

"I don't think we have time to talk."

Reinhardt roughly pulled the curtain, wondering what he had seen.

"Pardon?"

"I'm grateful and relieved that you believe in me. But let's do this for now. I'll tell you everything later."

Reinhardt stared straight into Scarlett's red eyes.

As if to say never forget.

"From now on, never leave my side."

"…Pardon?"

Scarlett's face paled at the strangely confessional words.

"Did you understand? Whatever happens, stick with me. Just remember that. Even if someone tries to tear me away from you, we must never be separated. If you understand, answer quickly."

"Huh? Yes… Ah, yes. So…"

Attempting to sever the connection?

Scarlett soon understood the meaning behind Reinhardt's sudden words.

-Whoosh!

Suddenly, Reinhardt shrank.

-Meow

"…”

The message was clear: take him wherever she went.

She trusted him, that much was true.

Although she didn't understand the situation, she could guess that Reinhardt wasn't there to harm her but to help her instead.

However.

The sight of the black cat's round, shining eyes overlapping with Reinhardt's dirty, sly gaze made Scarlett feel nauseous.

"I feel sick…”

-Meow!

Looking at the cat, who seemed to say it wasn't happy either as it waved its paws, Scarlett's nausea grew.

And then.

Soon.

-Knock, knock

Scarlett's muscles tensed as she heard someone knocking on her door.

"Scarlett, it's me."

It was Ludwig's voice.

If cats could have expressions, this one would certainly have a very serious face.

He had missed the timing and now couldn't discuss the important matter at hand.

The Demon King had become a cat with its mouth sealed shut.

However, it was clear that the Demon King had no intention of harming Scarlett, and Scarlett herself pitied Reinhardt.

Why had the Demon King come here?

And.

Why had Ludwig come here?

-Knock, knock

"Scarlett? If you're there, can you open the door?"

Scarlett felt an odd sense of fear creeping through her body.

It was certain that unknown events were unfolding and spreading around her.

Scarlett looked at the cat.

-Nod

As if to say it was okay to open the door, the cat nodded its head.

-Gulp

As she opened the door, Ludwig stood there.

With a bandage still wrapped around his right arm and unkempt hair, Ludwig looked much different than before.

His expression had somehow become sharper, and his face much darker.

"Ludwig…?"

"Ah, you're here."

Ludwig offered a faint smile.

Scarlett hadn't been told what was going on, so she knew she had to pretend to be calm.

"I thought you had gone somewhere else."

Scarlett felt uneasy at Ludwig's words.

He was a superhuman with senses far superior to ordinary people.

There was no way Ludwig couldn't have sensed someone on the other side of the wall.

"I thought I might have to go looking for you."

Ludwig would have known she was inside, deliberately not opening the door if she hadn't.

Somehow.

Scarlett couldn't help but notice Ludwig's blatant lie after just a few words.

She had to pretend to be calm right now.

As she didn't know what was going on and hadn't heard anything, she had to act as if she knew nothing.

She had to pretend as if nothing had happened.

"Have you… returned as well, Ludwig?"

"No, not exactly. I'll be leaving soon."

Ludwig gestured outside with a nod.

"The weather's nice. How about we take a short walk?"

Under normal circumstances, Scarlett would have agreed at the sight of Ludwig's gentle smile.

Though they weren't very close, all of the Temple Royal Class members were comrades in arms.

The camaraderie that came from crossing the line of life and death together was in a different league from ordinary friendships.

Each of them was incredibly precious to one another.

Though they might not have been intimately familiar with every aspect of each other's lives, they could die for each other.

Camaraderie was a very peculiar form of friendship for that reason.

Moreover, Ludwig had saved Scarlett's life at the risk of his own.

As a result, Delphin had lost her life, and Ludwig had even lost his right arm.

Of course, Scarlett had saved Ludwig first, but in the end, they were in a relationship where they owed each other their lives.

That's what it meant to be comrades.

Fear in this unknown situation was inevitable.

"Alright. Sounds good."

Nevertheless, Ludwig was incredibly precious to Scarlett.

As he was to all his other friends.

Scarlett could still die for Ludwig.

So, there was no reason they couldn't go for a walk.

"Um, just give me a moment."

"Sure."

Scarlett hadn't forgotten what the Demon King had said.

Ludwig watched as Scarlett disappeared into the room for a moment, only to reappear with a trot, holding the black cat in her arms.

"Ah… there you are?"

Ludwig grinned as he looked at the black cat, as if seeing a familiar face after a long time. Afraid of being misunderstood, Scarlett forced a smile on her lips.

She felt extremely awkward knowing what she was holding.

"Sh-should the… the cat… come along… for the… walk?"

Scarlett tried to say something without feeling awkward, but her tongue got twisted.

-Meow!

Fortunately, the black cat's sharp cry interrupted Scarlett.

Ludwig might not have known, but Scarlett understood the meaning of that cry well enough.

It meant to shut up.

"This one, always sticking around girls, huh?"

Ludwig cast a meaningful smile at the black cat.

-Meow!

The black cat desperately avoided Ludwig's gaze.

CHAPTER 643

6th month.

"It's getting warmer, feels like winter was just yesterday."

"You're right."

Ludwig and Scarlett walked along a path near the Royal Class dormitory.

As if the heavy snowfall that had tormented them was a distant memory, summer had arrived, and it was time to worry about the heat.

Could the war end before autumn came?

The coalition forces had reached a point where they could finally discuss the true end of the conflict.

Nevertheless, it wasn't yet the season of unbearable heat, so the weather was, quite literally, at its best.

Beyond the Temple domain, the desolation and starvation of the wastelands were not felt here.

The well-kept streets, neat shrubbery, and beautiful, elegant buildings could still be seen below the hills.

The Temple remained vast and beautiful.

Only the students were missing.

The massive campus that once gathered the continent's top talents for studying was now empty.

Either dead or on the battlefield.

There were still a few students left, but their numbers were minuscule, and the

majority of the teachers who should have been educating them had gone to the war.

Though still beautiful, a space without what should be there was nothing but dead.

Only a very limited number of people could see this place, as the Temple still maintained strict access control.

Scarlett walked quietly beside Ludwig, holding a black cat in her arms.

And then, she glanced at Ludwig's bandaged right arm.

Ludwig had said that he could regain his arm through some experimental procedure. It moved well and caused no discomfort, but he couldn't fight, so he was doing something in the rear lines.

Although they were comrades, they all had their own pressing matters to deal with.

Scarlett had vaguely thought Ludwig's situation was fortunate.

But then…

If Ludwig was with the rear support unit, which unit was it, and what was he doing there?

Scarlett had no idea what Ludwig was doing and had never asked.

From the beginning, after Ludwig returned to the coalition forces when spring started, he had only briefly visited the Royal Class base and was hardly seen.

She had thought his work with the rear support unit he'd been assigned to must have been busy.

Ludwig was so busy working with the rear support unit that he didn't even have time to see his friends.

But now that she thought about it, it was strange.

After their spring departure, the coalition forces had fought only once, in Wallen.

Their first destination, Grenosia, had already been crushed by the vanguard.

The main force had nothing to do but move, so why was Ludwig, supposedly in the rear, even busier?

Scarlett didn't know what the rear units did, so they could indeed have more work than the main force, but she couldn't figure out the reason.

Ludwig had said that although he had regained his arm, it was unsuitable for combat.

Could such a person easily use an essential warp spot to return to the wasteland like this?

Using a warp spot required procedures and permission, like Scarlett had.

Unfortunately, Ludwig was no longer that important.

Yet, he had calmly returned to the Temple during the coalition forces' advance and sought out Scarlett.

With the end of the war approaching and the upcoming battles, there was no time to focus on other things.

However, now those things started to catch her attention.

From one to ten, everything seemed strange.

Ludwig's arm.

Anna's warning.

Suddenly, the Demon King came for her.

And then, her power to neutralize.

Naturally.

Scarlett had an intuition that she had somehow become the core of these inexplicable events.

"Ludwig, that bandage on your arm… When will you take it off?"

"I probably won't be able to for a while."

"Is it… painful or something?"

"I can't say it's not, and it looks quite unsightly."

That right arm.

She couldn't help but realize that it was very strange as well.

She merely hoped that somehow she could use her arm again. But upon closer inspection now, something odd stood out.

Compared to Ludwig's left arm, it was unnaturally long. And the size of his hand and thickness of his forearm were also slightly larger.

Strange.

It was as if it belonged to someone else.

Scarlett's imagination filled her with fear.

What on earth was that arm?

"When the war is over, will we be able to live in the temple as we did before?"

Ludwig was talking about something entirely different.

"It would be nice if we could……”

"Right? Even if the Gate incident ends, there are still many monsters on the continent, and everything won't be completely over until all the monsters are dealt with."

Ludwig chuckled.

"And when the temple is operational again, will we be second-year students or fifth-year students?"

"I'm not really sure……”

If the temple started operating as it had before.

It wasn't just Scarlett who considered that possibility. Ludwig was thinking about it too.

"By the way."

"Yes?"

Was he finally getting to the elusive main point?

Scarlett tensely awaited Ludwig's words.

"This cat."

However, instead of the main point, Ludwig pointed at the black cat nestled in Scarlett's arms.

"Isn't it a bit strange?"

"Huh?"

At that, Scarlett flinched greatly.

The cat, trying its best to appear as if it didn't understand anything, desperately feigned composure.

"Strange…? Wha… What do you mean?"

Scarlett bit her tongue due to the sudden timing of the unexpected question, but Ludwig didn't seem to mind.

"No, it just doesn't seem to be growing at all."

"Ah……"

"It's been quite some time now, shouldn't it have grown a bit by now?"

Scarlett felt the same doubt that Ludwig did.

The black kitten.

By now, it should have grown into a full-grown cat, but it was still tiny.

The default appearance of the shape-shifter, who found being small cute, hadn't changed.

"Maybe… there's a breed…? I don't know, but maybe that's not the case…?"

"Hmm, could be? I don't know much about cats either. That might be possible."

Fortunately, both Ludwig and Scarlett could pass it off as not knowing.

Scarlett sighed with relief in her mind.

From behind Ludwig, who was walking slightly ahead, Scarlett glared at the black cat cradled in her arms.

'You invite suspicion by transforming thoughtlessly!'

Her gaze was so intense that it conveyed that meaning, but the cat maintained its ignorance and yawned.

"Scarlett."

Then, Ludwig's voice suddenly became solemn.

"Yes, Ludwig."

Now, at last, was he going to tell her the reason he had come?

Instinctively, Scarlett could only feel it.

Ludwig turned to Scarlett and spoke.

"Have you ever considered living outside the temple?"

“…Huh?"

It was an utterly unexpected question, and Scarlett couldn't help but be taken aback.

Leaving the intact temple behind, there seemed to be no intention of staying outside.

The attitude conveyed that it was natural for him to provide such a place.

"The temple is, well, not as safe as you might think."

"Not safe…?"

"Yep."

Ludwig quietly looked at Scarlett.

"I think it's better to stay somewhere safer than the temple. That's why I'm suggesting it."

"…"

At those words, Scarlett quietly looked at Ludwig.

"Ludwig."

"Yeah?"

"You know that this situation is strange, right?"

The temple was dangerous. Therefore, he would find a safer place for her to stay.

It was definitely strange that Ludwig, of all people, calmly returned to the temple and said this.

However, Scarlett didn't ask anything, and Ludwig didn't provide any explanation.

Ludwig slowly nodded to Scarlett's observation.

"You're right, it must feel strange. That I can come and go from the Imperial Capital as I please, and that I can provide you with a safe place. Even my bandaged right arm would seem suspicious."

"…"

No matter how one looked at it, Ludwig didn't seem to be anyone other than someone plotting something.

"Still, can't you trust me?"

At Ludwig's words, Scarlett bit her lip.

"I trust you, Ludwig. Of course I trust you. You're precious to me. I definitely… think highly of you, and I'd be willing to die for you."

It wasn't because Ludwig saved her life that he was precious to Scarlett; all her friends and comrades were precious to her.

The war had changed so much that everyone she knew had become as precious and important as her own life.

Even Erich de Lafaeri, who had tormented her.

As the moments spent crossing the line of life and death piled up, she could risk her life even for him. And she was confident that, conversely, Erich could risk his life for Scarlett.

That's what comrades were.

It was a request to trust from Ludwig, one of those precious people.

Of course she trusted him.

"But Ludwig, I don't know anything. What's going on? I don't know anything. If you don't tell me anything… suddenly hearing this, I feel so frustrated and scared."

Anna's warning.

The Demon King's question.

And Ludwig's suggestion.

Something was happening, but Scarlett had not a single definite piece of knowledge.

"What on earth… is going on for things to be like this?"

That question was directed at Ludwig and, at the same time, at the Demon King she held in her arms.

What am I, that you suddenly come looking for me?

What can my abilities do?

Ludwig's expression became strange at Scarlett's question.

"Ah…”

As if he had realized something.

Ludwig, with a bizarre expression, began to laugh.

"Ha… ha… ha… haha… haha…”

Whether he was drained or disillusioned, Ludwig laughed with an indiscernible expression, almost as if he had gone half mad.

"Ludwig…?"

As Ludwig suddenly started laughing, Scarlett felt chills run down her spine and called his name.

"Ah… this, this… haha… it's like this… it's like this… haha… that's right… haha… I'm no different… haha…”

And so it was.

For some time, Ludwig laughed a hollow, listless laugh, but at some point…

"…”

He suddenly stopped.

"I'm sorry, Scarlett."

"…”

"Sometimes, it's better not to know."

Realizing that he himself had become the kind of person who would say such a thing, Ludwig knew how absurd it was, and he laughed for a long time.

To make someone aware.

To keep someone ignorant.

As much as he despised those who made such decisions, Ludwig found himself saying these words to his friend.

It's better not to know.

But while Ludwig might ridicule himself for this, he had no intention of stopping what he had to do.

On the contrary, wasn't it a good thing?

To befriend a monster, one had to become a monster.

To kill a monster, one had to become a monster.

Wasn't this proof that he had become a monster?

If so, then he could truly kill monsters.

To have such power, to wield such authority.

No longer would he hear that he was worthless, that he was nothing.

At least in that respect.

Even if he were to fall and die, wouldn't he no longer be miserable?

In response to Ludwig's words that it's better not to know, Scarlett looked at him with a determined expression.

"Even if you can't explain anything to me, are you saying it's safer for me to stay outside the temple?"

"Yeah. If you know something, it'll only become more dangerous."

So trust me, Ludwig said.

Scarlett didn't doubt Ludwig's intentions at all.

However…

"I'm not sure…"

"What do you mean?"

"Ever since a certain moment… it seems like you're not the Ludwig I used to know."

The change in Ludwig, who had returned with a new arm, was not only in his appearance. Though she couldn't focus on it properly, Scarlett couldn't help but feel that Ludwig had become an entirely different person.

From the moment he returned and even now, as he spoke these unfamiliar words.

Not just his words, but his attitude, gaze, and actions.

Even his aura.

To Scarlett, the Ludwig before her felt like a completely different person.

"I don't want to say this, but… you scare me, Ludwig."

"Scary…?"

"Yes."

And so, faced with the changed appearance of her friend, Scarlett couldn't help but feel fear.

"Scarlett, I had no choice but to change."

"…"

"When Asher died, when Delphin died. No, from the moment the Gate incident happened until now, how could I not change?"

Ludwig's words were true.

So much had happened that change was inevitable.

Without change, they couldn't bear it.

Not just Ludwig, but Scarlett as well had changed, albeit to varying degrees.

The only ones who hadn't changed were the dead.

Rather, it was more peculiar that the Demon King, who still bore some resemblance to his former self after all that had happened, maintained even a trace of his old self.

"You're right. I'm sure that's true. But… to tell me to do as you say without knowing anything… it's so unlike the Ludwig I've known."

It wasn't that he had changed; he seemed like an entirely different person.

"If I were to refuse to do as you say, what would happen? What would you do?"

"…"

If it had been the old Ludwig, he would have accepted Scarlett's refusal and said there was nothing he could do.

Had it not been for that, he would have tried to explain and persuade her with all his reasons.

Nevertheless, he would not have been upset or resentful at Scarlett's refusal.

But now.

What would he do if Scarlett were to reject such a proposal from Ludwig?

It seemed as if he would force her to listen, whether she wanted to or not.

Ludwig gazed at Scarlett with deep, dark eyes.

"Scarlett, there's one thing I can tell you."

"…"

"There are people who want to use you. You might not know it now, but someday, they will definitely try to exploit you."

"They… want to use me?"

"Yes."

To use her.

Was that the intention behind the Demon King's visit?

To exploit her?

But the Demon King, who was nestled in Scarlettt's arms in the form of a cat, could not say anything.

"Scarlett, there are those within the alliance who are colluding with the Demon King."

"!"

Upon hearing that, Scarlett could not help but widen her eyes.

It was already a shocking and strange situation that the Demon King was nestled in her arms.

Did it mean the Demon King's influence had already reached within the alliance?

"And their numbers are not few."

Contrary to what the alliance soldiers and people thought, Ludwig knew that a considerable part of the alliance had already fallen to the Demon King and that many more would continue to fall.

"The Demon King already knows about your power and will soon discover that your abilities have grown stronger than before. No, he might already know."

As Ludwig said, the Demon King already knew.

Scarlett could not help but realize it upon hearing it from Ludwig's mouth.

Was it just that he knew?

The Demon King had been faster than Ludwig.

"The Demon King… wants to use my power… my abilities?"

"Probably."

She did not know in what way her power would be used.

But the Demon King could not say anything now.

Although the Demon King had come first, Ludwig was the first to explain.

Scarlett could not help but feel terrified upon seeing Ludwig's grave expression.

"It's strange… that you, Ludwig would say such a thing…"

Ludwig was Ludwig.

"It's like… you have to… be the one to confront the Demon King… as if you can…"

The Demon King was too great and heavy a name.

He might be a small cat now, but the Demon King was no ordinary being.

On the other hand, Ludwig was an ordinary being.

He was not Ellen, nor the Emperor, nor Saviolin Turner.

But now Ludwig spoke as if he had to confront the Demon King himself, as if it was possible for him to do so.

He spoke as if he was someone capable of doing so, or as if he belonged to a group that could do it.

The Ludwig Scarlett knew was not that kind of person at all.

"I don't know whether I can do it or not. What's important is that someone has to do it."

Without knowing whether it was possible or not, he said it had to be done.

That was not Ludwig, but Ellen.

Scarlett swallowed her rising words.

The Demon King is not the person you think he is.

He is not that kind of being.

He only wished for peace but could do nothing.

He wanted to save the world, but instead, he made it this way.

He was nothing but a pitiful and wretched being.

I heard that miserable and tragic confession firsthand.

And so both the hero and the Demon King were ultimately just pitiable people.

Scarlett wanted to say that.

And so, whenever Ludwig occasionally expressed hatred towards the Demon King or made such remarks to Ellen, Scarlett would stop him from doing so.

She would tell him not to torment Ellen.

As it was, she hoped he would not cause the already struggling hero any more pain.

Subtly dissuading those who criticized the Demon King, those who spoke such words around Ellen, was the best Scarlett could do.

Although she wanted to argue on behalf of the Demon King while holding him in her arms, she couldn't.

Scarlett couldn't help but feel it from Ludwig's expression.

No persuasion would work on the changed Ludwig.

The changed Ludwig merely spoke.

The Ludwig who always sought others' opinions and listened to their stories was gone.

"Scarlett, anyone will try to use you. They will put you in danger. So let's stay somewhere else. Somewhere no one can find you. Stay safe until everything is settled. Can you do that?"

Before someone tried to use her, before it became dangerous.

She would hide from the world.

"Then, wouldn't you, Ludwig, be… using me instead?"

If someone tried to use her, there might be an opposite case as well.

It could also be a situation where Ludwig was actually trying to use Scarlett.

It might have been a statement that could greatly hurt Ludwig's feelings, but he simply shook his head.

"That won't happen."

"…"

"I won't put you in danger."

Although she didn't know much, Ludwig had no intention of using her. The Demon King and others coveted Scarlett's power.

Was Ludwig merely thinking of stopping someone from using her before they could?

Scarlett couldn't figure out why Ludwig was saying this or why the Demon King was looking for her in the first place.

Ludwig, who said nothing but claimed this was the best course of action for her.

The Demon King, who promised to explain everything later and told her never to leave his side.

Which side was right?

As someone who had witnessed the Demon King's despair firsthand and knew the whole truth about him, Scarlett trusted the Demon King.

And she trusted Ludwig, who had saved her life and even sacrificed his arm for her.

She trusted both.

But she was forced to choose.

Would she follow Ludwig and leave?

Would she reject Ludwig's offer to hear the Demon King's explanation?

But was there really a need to make a decision right now?

"Ludwig… Can you give me… some time to think?"

At Scarlett's words, Ludwig fell silent.

In his silence, an unmistakable sense of urgency was evident. His every action seemed to suggest that there was no time.

But the fact that time was passing even as he remained silent did not change.

"I can't give you much time."

In his words, it was already clear that he was not considering Scarlett's refusal.

Scarlett couldn't help but know from Ludwig's words that if she refused, he would take her away by force.

CHAPTER 644

Ludwig's anxiety was, in fact, meaningless.

His anxiety stemmed from the fear that the Demon King or other forces might approach Scarlett, but at the moment Ludwig arrived, the Demon King was already with Scarlett.

When Scarlett asked for time, Ludwig had merely said that he could wait for a few hours at most.

At Scarlett's request to be alone, Ludwig told her to gather her thoughts while he went for a walk and left for somewhere.

Scarlett didn't know that Ludwig had gone to the Temple Magic University.

Ludwig had changed strangely at some point.

She knew the truth, but she couldn't know what the Demon King had been doing and where he had been all this time.

Ultimately, both were frightening to Scarlett.

She trusted both, but she couldn't help but fear them now.

She managed to return to her dormitory room.

"What… what happened?"

The cat had transformed back into the Demon King, and Scarlett demanded an explanation from him.

Though she was afraid, she had to know how the situation was unfolding.

The Demon King cautiously peered out the window.

He was checking if Ludwig was nearby, possibly watching Scarlett's movements.

With no eavesdroppers nearby, the Demon King began to speak.

"Do you remember the strange army we saw during the last Wallen battle?"

"Yes, clearly…”

Everyone had witnessed the peculiar army's might.

They all had some idea that it was the true power the Empire had been hiding all along.

"To explain it properly, it's a bit gruesome, but that army was actually similar to golems."

"Golems… you say?"

"Yes."

Reinhardt nodded quietly.

"Golems made from corpses."

At those words, Scarlett couldn't help but gasp for breath.

Just as Ludwig didn't intend to give Scarlett much time, the Demon King also didn't have much time to explain things to her.

What power the Empire had tapped into, who those revived people were.

And who were responsible for those experiments.

Hearing all these stories in such a short time left Scarlett dumbfounded.

There were too many horrifying revelations.

And the ones responsible for those experiments all along had been Christina, Louis, and Anna, who had been calmly conversing with her.

"Recently, Ludwig received one of those arms as a transplant."

"Ludwig… underwent a chimera procedure?"

"Yes, what else could it be?"

At the Demon King's question of whether there could be any other magic capable of that, Scarlett had no words.

War made too many things possible.

Scarlett couldn't help but feel her heart sink at the thought that Ludwig wanted to return to the battlefield so much that he needed such magic.

But at the same time, she couldn't help but wonder.

It was a brutal and horrific army, but in the end, it was a necessary one.

As an army created to end the war, wasn't it an immediately needed force?

"But… why would I be important if I can neutralize that army?"

Before she could finish her sentence, Scarlett naturally realized.

After the Gate incident.

The Demon King was talking about what would come next.

Someone might try to use her, Ludwig had said.

"After the Gate Incident is over… Do you want me to eliminate that army for you…?"

It was not only the strongest force in human history but also the most powerful in all of history.

Scarlett could easily neutralize that army with her abilities.

Just as she had turned the golems into scrap metal in an instant, she could do the same to that army. The most powerful force in history would be rendered powerless with ease.

"Yes."

The Demon King nodded his head.

"Ludwig is right."

With no intention to deny, the Demon King spoke.

"Ludwig really came back to protect you, and I intend to use you."

There was no point in excuses or rationalizations.

No matter how suspicious it appeared, Ludwig's words about protecting Scarlett were true.

No matter how well disguised, the Demon King's reality was that he had to use Scarlett.

Ludwig had hurried back to the temple to protect Scarlett from the Demon King's grasp, and the Demon King had arrived even earlier for the purpose of using her.

Unable to help herself, Scarlett trembled at the Demon King's candid admission.

"Do we… really have to fight?"

"…"

"We don't have to, do we? You… never wanted this. You're not the kind of person who wants this."

"…"

"Many people have already died or been injured because of the Gate Incident, and now, even before it's over, we have to think about the next battle?"

At Scarlett's desperate plea, the Demon King leaned silently against the wall.

"Yeah, maybe we don't have to fight. Who knows?"

"Then, after everything is settled, can't we just live in our own places? If there's no

battle, the army has no meaning."

"That's true, definitely."

No matter how powerful an army, it holds no meaning outside the battlefield.

In this vast land, where most of it had become empty from countless people dying, shouldn't they be able to live in their own places?

Scarlett couldn't understand why they needed to prepare for the next battle right after one had ended.

"The situation has changed too much from before."

"Changed… how?"

"Do you even know the situation in the Empire? You know even less about the situation of the allied forces."

Scarlett had been away from the Empire for a long time and therefore didn't know how it functioned.

She naturally didn't know the atmosphere of the allied forces either, as she wasn't in a position to make such decisions.

"We've come too far to stop now. We've done too much to just call it quits and live separately in our own places."

This wasn't a toy that could easily be reset after having enough fun.

The world was too big to play with.

That's why things remained as they were once set in motion.

Not everything could be nullified.

"I don't know. In the end, my actions might cause even bigger problems this time. It's possible."

Just as all the actions taken to prevent the Gate Incident ultimately completed it, a

similar outcome might be in store this time.

But at least, Scarlett knew that the events unfolding in the world were not part of the Demon King's conspiracy.

This was not the Demon King's conspiracy, but his failure.

Even after experiencing that miserable failure, the Demon King had built something once again.

"It might be a selfish act. My attempt to do something again after failing once might seem repulsive to someone, even unforgivable. And there are indeed people who feel that way."

"…"

"But I've come too far to stop now. I don't know what kind of outcome my actions will lead to, but stopping now, as if nothing ever happened, would be the biggest mistake I could make."

If he hadn't wanted to do it, he shouldn't have done anything at all.

If something had been started, it should be seen through to the end.

Everything that had been built up would collapse the moment he gave up halfway.

The Demon King didn't know the perfect answer either.

However, he did know one thing for sure: the perfect wrong answer.

At this point, where half of the Imperial Army and half of the Allied Forces had been swallowed up.

Running away from everything, pretending as if nothing had happened.

That was the perfect wrong answer.

"I won't deny that helping me is a very risky choice. And I won't say that helping me is the right choice, either. After all, I might be wrong."

"…"

"I don't know the answer either. And I know that there are legitimate reasons for those who want to kill me, and I have no excuse for their anger towards me. Anyway, all of these things happened because of me."

Those who sought to kill the Demon King also had their own reasons, and no one could deny them.

However, the Demon King had a path he wanted to follow.

He had come too far to turn back.

Now, he had to follow that path, make it safer, and ensure its certainty.

That was the only reality, and all other options had become unavailable.

"Scarlett."

"…"

"Help me."

The Demon King looked at the red-haired girl.

"I need you."

In her life, Scarlett had never heard such a short yet sincere request.

Scarlett stared at the Demon King, her body tense.

No.

She looked at Reinhardt.

Memories from long ago brushed past her.

Memories that seemed to have been forgotten and vanished amidst wars and countless deaths.

But those memories, hidden somewhere deep in her heart, were undoubtedly resurfacing.

The Demon King.

Reinhardt was an odd fellow.

An A-Class, he was rumored to have abilities even weaker than those of B-Class mages, yet he was always getting into trouble.

Not only within the A-Class but also in the B-Class, there were rumors that he was a strange guy.

A person who shouldn't be involved with.

Reinhardt was definitely that kind of person.

But to Scarlett, Reinhardt had a slightly different meaning as a strange person.

One day.

"What's wrong with being red?"

He had said those words out of the blue when he saw her being bullied by Erich de Lafaeri.

Strong guys were the bosses, he said.

It must have been after he had won a duel against a senior.

After achieving victory through a strange miracle in what was surely a reckless fight, Reinhardt had said that.

In truth.

At that time, Scarlett had been more afraid of Reinhardt than Erich.

Their paths hadn't crossed much.

But Scarlett had always watched Reinhardt from a distance.

If only I could be like that.

If only I had that kind of courage.

To Scarlett, who had been cowering in fear of being expelled from the temple, Reinhardt had been a shocking figure in many ways.

Before she knew it,

She was always watching Reinhardt.

She wanted to be like him.

And so, Reinhardt became her idol in her heart.

In that way,

Recalling the past naturally brought other memories to mind.

As the memory of that time surfaced, Scarlett couldn't help but smile in this situation.

No, rather, she couldn't help but laugh at herself for having such thoughts in this situation.

"Do you remember the tournament?"

"Huh… suddenly?"

The Demon King nodded his head with a flustered expression at Scarlett's question.

“…I remember."

Reinhardt couldn't help but remember that moment when Scarlett, who had no connection to him, had told him that he was her idol.

Those times and events from the past had been buried in countless deaths and sorrows.

Yet, because they were so insignificant, they had become precious moments.

After all, the days when everything was peaceful and there were no problems could never return.

"I told you back then. There are people who dislike you, but there are also people who like you."

"That's right… you did say that."

Due to Reinhardt's strange personality, there were many people who disliked him.

But even then, strangely, there were people who didn't dislike Reinhardt.

Even if it wasn't Ellen or Harriet, there were quite a few people who got along well with Reinhardt.

There were many who disliked him, but there were definitely those who liked him as well.

Why would anyone like that guy? Why would anyone hang out with someone like him?

There were many people who talked behind their backs.

Seeing that, Scarlett realized.

"Just as I can't make everyone like me, I can't make everyone hate me either. I realized that by watching you."

"Right… you did say that."

Scarlett had come to that realization.

If it was impossible to be loved by everyone, then it must also be impossible to be hated by everyone.

"Strangely enough, a lot has changed… too much has changed…"

Scarlett looked at Reinhardt.

The being now called the Demon King.

"You're still in the same situation."

Just as there were people who hated Reinhardt but also those who liked him back then.

The same was true for the Demon King.

Some may hate the Demon King so much that they want to kill him, but some cannot hate him.

Or perhaps, some still love the Demon King.

Only the scale had grown from the temple to the whole world.

“…Is that how it's going to be?"

As if understanding what she was saying, the Demon King smiled bitterly.

In the temple of the past, Scarlett was one of those who had liked Reinhardt.

It was different from the others in that she liked him not as a romantic interest but with a sense of admiration.

Reinhardt, who was once her idol, had now become the accursed Demon King, whose name was hardly even mentioned.

No, he had been the Demon King from the beginning.

Such a being had sought her out across a vast expanse of time.

And he sincerely asked for her help.

To help him.

That he needed her.

What should she do?

The Demon King had his own circumstances. He said he hadn't wanted this to happen, but who among those who knew his situation could say that he deserved to

stand on the blade of judgment?

But what about the opposite?

How could the cries of those who claimed that the Demon King had to die be unjust?

There was a justification for righteousness, but there was also a justification for death.

The Demon King was a contradictory existence.

Just as the Demon King had his own reasons,

Those who desired the Demon King's death and destruction have their own reasons as well.

If everyone was justified and everyone had their own reasons, then what should she choose?

"I…”

At the crossroads of choice, Scarlett slowly opened her mouth.

CHAPTER 645

A short while later.

Ludwig returned after a brief stroll.

To be precise, he had stopped by the Magic University, but it hadn't taken much time.

He couldn't leave his post for long due to his anxiety.

Scarlett was in a very dangerous situation.

It was only natural for her to be flustered since he had told her to follow his words without properly explaining the situation.

It was only right to give her time to think, but he couldn't afford to give her much.

Upon returning to the temple dormitory, Ludwig cautiously knocked on Scarlett's door.

"Scarlett, it's me."

Standing in front of the door, Ludwig quietly waited.

There was no response.

Was she pondering somewhere else rather than in her room?

Knock, knock.

"Scarlett."

He knocked again, but Ludwig didn't hear a response.

Ludwig silently waited in front of the door for an answer.

Knock, knock.

And then, for the third time.

Ludwig's expression had hardened.

He knew as well.

There was no sign of life in the room from the beginning.

He had only knocked on the door just in case.

Ludwig knew that Scarlett wasn't in the room.

"…"

Could it be?

No way.

It couldn't be.

Absolutely not.

It couldn't be.

Scarlett couldn't be like that.

Ludwig hypnotized himself as if trying to convince himself.

As he thought that, Ludwig's eyes sank deeper into the abyss.

In that case.

What should he do?

How could he?

How could Scarlett?

No.

How could he help Scarlett?

What should he do?

"…"

As the ominous shadow of his thoughts shifted toward an ominous decision.

"Ludwig."

It wasn't the door, but unexpectedly, he sensed a presence in the lobby. Ludwig turned his head.

Scarlett was walking towards him, dragging a large trunk from the lobby.

"I had to pack some things."

Ludwig barely heard her words.

He walked straight towards Scarlett.

Seeing Ludwig approaching with a terrifyingly hardened expression, Scarlett couldn't help but be flustered. Unknowingly, she took a small step back.

"Ludwig…? Why that expression…?"

Bang!

"!"

Ludwig suddenly and roughly embraced Scarlett.

Naturally, Scarlett was flustered by his sudden embrace.

"Why… why all of a sudden…?"

"I'm relieved."

“…Pardon?"

"I'm relieved."

Though it wasn't hers, Scarlett could vividly feel Ludwig's heart pounding as if it would burst while embracing her.

What on earth was he relieved about?

What was he so relieved for?

"I'm relieved… Truly relieved…"

Scarlett didn't know, but somehow she felt like she knew a little.

She couldn't help but tremble slightly.

"Ca-calm down. I… I won't go anywhere."

As she embraced Ludwig back, Scarlett gently stroked his back.

As they were embracing, Scarlett couldn't see how violently Ludwig's eyes were shaking.

"I'm relieved… Scarlett…"

Since he didn't have to think about anything.

Since he didn't have to imagine anything.

Ludwig muttered the same words endlessly like a madman.

Contrary to Ludwig's ominous imagination, Scarlett hadn't suddenly disappeared.

However, it seemed that she had gone somewhere to get something, as she returned dragging a large trunk.

"We don't have much time. Let's go now."

"Ah… All right. Let's go, Ludwig."

As if to calm him down.

Although she had said didn’t go anywhere, Scarlett held Ludwig in her arms, soothingly stroking his back.

Scarlett was now busy packing, no longer asking or questioning anything.

Yet, Ludwig couldn't shake the thought that Scarlett might have disappeared.

He wondered what he should do if that were the case.

If Scarlett had disappeared, if she had other thoughts in mind.

What should he do then?

He imagined what he should do with Scarlett.

For a brief moment, he doubted Scarlett, who seemed willing to follow him.

He even had fearful imaginings beyond doubt.

"I'm sorry, Scarlett. I'm sorry…”

"It's all right…”

As she heard Ludwig's sudden apology, Scarlett hugged him even tighter.

It seemed as if they couldn't see each other's trembling eyes as they held one another.

'I'm… I'm sorrier… '

Ludwig also couldn't see Scarlett's twisted expression.

Ludwig and Scarlett walked out of the Royal Class dormitory.

Regardless of Ludwig's relief that his ominous thoughts didn't come true, he couldn't help but be curious.

"What did you go out to get?"

If there was anything to pack, it would be clothes. But the clothes were in Scarlett's room, yet she had appeared from the lobby.

"Ah, I got some books from the library. I thought… since you wouldn't say, I might be staying for a long time."

"I see…"

It seemed as if she understood they would be away from the temple for quite some time, even without him saying anything. Ludwig had no choice but to accept her reasoning for bringing books to pass the time.

"You'll return them for me, right?"

Scarlett looked at Ludwig with a mischievous expression as she spoke.

Returning books.

It was such a trivial matter, but since Scarlett pretended not to know on purpose, Ludwig let out a bitter laugh.

"…I'll return them, and if you need anything, I'll get it for you, no matter what."

"So, it doesn't have to be a book, right?"

"Of course."

Although there wasn't much he could do in this world, he intended to provide anything within his capabilities.

Naturally, she could only be grateful. Who wouldn't be, when she obediently followed his request to find a hiding place, despite possibly exploiting her power?

"But what about the cat? It seemed like we could bring it."

Ludwig found it strange that Scarlett hadn't brought the cat she had taken for a walk just a while ago.

Wouldn't the cat be all right, even if a person wasn't?

It would certainly be a boring life without it.

"It was just playing with me for a while; I'm not its owner. Wouldn't it be better off staying at the temple dormitory?"

"Ah… I see. You just came back, too, Scarlett."

"That's right."

Scarlett silently watched as the temple entrance drew closer.

A person who said nothing.

A person who told bold lies.

Who was the worse person?

Obviously, it would be the latter.

Scarlett thought so.

As soon as Scarlett stepped out of the temple, she was confronted by a mage wearing a robe.

The mage wore a plain, gray robe with no distinguishing features.

Scarlett didn't ask anything of Ludwig, and Ludwig was secretly grateful that Scarlett didn't question him.

However, Scarlett knew who the figure before her was.

No, it would be more appropriate to say she knew 'what' it was.

An army composed of the dead.

When she didn't know its true nature, it was mysterious, but now that she knew, she couldn't help but feel creeped out just facing it.

In order to end the war, they had dabbled in dangerous magic, and what stood before her was only a small part of the outcome.

In a flash, along with teleportation magic, Scarlett found herself in a room she had never seen before.

The place where Scarlett arrived wasn't a street, but a room in some building.

Scarlett looked around the spacious, yet unfamiliar room.

She immediately noticed a particular feature of the room she was in.

There were no windows.

She couldn't tell whether it was above or below ground.

"Ludwig, where… where are we?"

Scarlett couldn't even tell whether they were somewhere within the palace or in a different city.

In response to Scarlett's question about their location, Ludwig quietly grabbed her shoulder.

"Scarlett."

“…Yes."

"Just wait a little longer. I promise, I won't keep you here long."

Instead of answering her question, he made a promise.

Ludwig's words said it all.

It implied that she would essentially be imprisoned here.

Ludwig explained various things to Scarlett.

If anything was lacking or needed, or if anything happened, she should speak to the person guarding the door.

There was plenty of food and other necessities prepared.

"I'm not allowed to leave… am I?"

In the end, at Scarlett's direct question, Ludwig cast his eyes downward.

"I'm sorry, it's all to protect you…"

Ludwig tried to say that, but closed his mouth.

It seemed unbearable for him to say such words while confining his friend.

"I'm sorry."

"…It can't be helped."

The words of resignation that came from Scarlett's lips carried a similar resonance to what Ludwig had once said.

Ludwig left.

The army known as the Immortals.

Scarlett now knew that the rear support unit he had mentioned was that army.

Ludwig would not have been in the rear support, but fighting at the front lines. It was clear that he must have been fighting in the most dangerous places.

Both the Demon King and Ludwig were doing what they could.

And Scarlett, too, had chosen what she thought she should do.

A room without windows.

The room itself was spacious, with a bathroom and seemingly no inconveniences for living.

However, Scarlett found the appearance of the large room strangely unsettling.

It wasn’t like there were iron bars.

All the furniture seemed to be made of high-quality materials.

Yet, the lack of windows, the overall structure of the room that made it impossible to tell whether it was above or below ground, and the soundproofing made her feel a certain way.

It didn't look like a prison, but it was a room made to be one.

A prison designed to hold those difficult to treat as prisoners.

Before the Gate incident, who was this kind of room meant to imprison?

Scarlett didn't know.

All she could do was accept what had already happened and endure it.

Scarlett began to unpack her clothes from the trunk.

She would have to stay here for a while.

The trunk contained more books than clothes.

Among the miscellaneous books were specialized texts, novels, history books, and even dictionaries.

She brought them to pass the time.

That's how Scarlett explained it.

In all honesty, it seemed like it would take years to read all those books.

In a room with no one but herself, Scarlett took out an ordinary novel.

But the content of the novel wasn't written there.

Scarlett flipped through the pages one by one.

What was written there were formulas and diagrams.

[Teleport]

[Mass Teleport]

[Noise Canceling]

Inside the novel was not a novel, but a magic scroll.

"I'm sorry, Ludwig."

Scarlett carefully closed the scroll book disguised as a novel and tucked it into a pile of books in the trunk.

Ludwig had locked Scarlett in an unknown prison.

No, to be precise, he was under the illusion that he had locked her up.

One item she received from the Demon King, the scroll book.

And the second item.

Scarlett fiddled with the purple brooch she had tucked away.

When the time came, the Demon King would send a signal.

Then all she had to do was carry out the agreed-upon action.

"…"

Before she knew it, Scarlett's palms were damp with cold sweat.

'…I'll help you.'

After much contemplation, Scarlett decided to help me.

To be honest, I didn't expect Scarlett to be on my side.

But, as Scarlett had said, there might be people who understood me just as there

were people who didn't.

And Scarlett was one of the former.

After returning to Lazak, I spoke with Charlotte and Harriet.

"Wouldn't it have been better to bring her with us?"

Harriet furrowed her brow, perhaps worried about leaving Scarlett behind.

She seemed uneasy, having given Scarlett the scroll book and signal device and then leaving her behind.

Leaving Scarlett behind was dangerous, regardless of whether or not she could be used.

"I thought so too."

“…You didn't tell her to stay behind, did you?"

"Yes."

Charlotte bit her lip.

Charlotte had been the closest to Scarlett in Class B.

"It's dangerous, but at this point, Scarlett made the wise decision."

Despite her anxiety, Charlotte had to admit that Scarlett's decision had been the best one.

'If I disappear, won't the situation become even more dangerous?'

Scarlett had said that clearly.

"Immortals automatically recover when destroyed. Scarlett is the person who can most perfectly neutralize Immortals without any harm at this point. If Scarlett suddenly disappears… something even more dangerous might happen."

Provoking those who had control over the Immortals, including Christina and

Ludwig, was a very dangerous act.

Scarlett's disappearance had already excited the others, so the best decision to reassure them was for Scarlett to be captured for now.

Scarlett had chosen to become a prisoner herself.

She was grateful for the help she had received, but she had found herself in the most dangerous situation.

That's why I had given her not only the scrollbook I always carried, but also a signaling device I had prepared in case our conversation with Scarlett unfolded in an unexpected way.

If Scarlett was in danger, or if we needed her on our side, we would send a signal.

In the end, Scarlett had to deceive her friends.

A friend who had to imprison another friend.

A friend who had to deceive a friend trying to imprison her.

“…How sad."

Charlotte murmured, her expression bleak, as if the reality her former B-class classmates now faced was unbearable.

The possibility of Scarlett's power that had been conveyed through the archduke.

I had moved immediately upon hearing the news, so I was able to reach Scarlett more quickly than Ludwig.

What would have happened if I had been late?

If I had arrived at the Royal Class dormitory after Ludwig had taken Scarlett and disappeared?

If I couldn't find out where Scarlett had gone?

What would have happened then?

This time, I was fast.

That's why I could use Scarlett.

However, as I said with my own mouth.

Using Scarlett ultimately put her in danger, and that fact remained unchanged.

After all the twists and turns.

Because of me.

The two original heroines.

Delphin had died.

Scarlett had to deceive Ludwig.

"…"

"Everything will be fine."

I wasn't sure what my expression was like, but Harriet cautiously wrapped her arm around my shoulder.

"That's right."

Charlotte, who was watching the scene, nodded with a determined expression.

"Everything will be fine."

Please.

It has to work out.

We said it, but we didn't know if it was conviction, an assertion, or a prayer.

Or just a mere hope.

We could no longer tell.

CHAPTER 646

Nighttime.

"That's a relief."

Having heard Ludwig's story, Christina closed the book and silently nodded.

Almost everyone in the camp had fallen asleep after the day's march.

Inside a portable tent, Christina was talking with Ludwig and two others.

Everyone, except Christina, had grim expressions on their faces.

Ludwig, in particular, seemed unable to forgive himself for what he had done and hung his head.

They had essentially decided to confine their friend, until everything was resolved.

No matter how much they did it for Scarlett's safety, she had to endure confinement without any explanation, not knowing where she was or how long she would be there.

The expressions of Louis, Anna, and Ludwig were grim, but Christina's was slightly different.

"Hmm…”

There was definitely a hint of suspicion in her eyes.

"Scarlett agreed to do as we said, so what's the problem?"

Louis Ancton asked Christina with a slightly sharp tone.

After all, it was Christina who had suggested confining Scarlett, and everything had been carried out according to Christina's will.

"Don't be so sensitive. This was necessary."

Louis Ancton gritted his teeth.

Eventually, someone had to make a decision.

Christina was merely playing that role.

"Did Scarlett seem off to you?"

"If it was off, then what?"

Ludwig couldn't hide his discomfort at Christina's seemingly suspicious question.

"No, I mean, anything at all."

"Nothing."

Ludwig cut off Christina's question as if it wasn't worth considering.

At Ludwig's words, Christina sighed.

"I know I'm a bitch, but why do you guys seem more emotional than me?"

Christina's gaze turned cold.

"Do you think this is a time for petty arguments or emotional fights? The Immortals may be the most powerful army, but Scarlett is the only person who can instantly and perfectly neutralize them. With the Immortals alone, we can kill the empire and the demon king, but they can't even inflict a minor wound on Scarlett."

If Scarlett wanted to, she could erase the Immortals as easily as erasing with a rubber eraser.

"So what are you getting at? That we should suspect Scarlett?"

At Louis's words, Christina clenched her teeth.

"I'm grateful that Scarlett followed our instructions, but is it so strange for me to say we should be prepared for anything?"

"…"

"We're not the only ones who know about Scarlett's power. Adelia knew from the beginning."

"No way… now even Adelia?"

"Who do you think Adelia is with right now!"

"!"

"Have you already forgotten who the daughter of Duke Saint Owan is?"

When Christina raised her voice, the others finally realized that what she was saying was true.

It wasn't Adelia they were doubting.

It was the other three who were emotional, not Christina.

Feeling wretched for confining their friend, they hadn't been thinking about what they should have.

"The Holy Order has already fallen to the demon king. The Alliance is slowly turning everyone to their side, but don't you think Duke Saint Owan is an exception? Duke Saint Owan has undoubtedly, almost certainly, sided with the demon king. He may have even joined that side before the Holy Order!"

As the Demon King began to show signs of movement, it was inevitable that he would make contact with Archduke Saint Owan.

It was a matter that could be understood without seeing it with one's own eyes.

Discussing the possibility of Archduke Saint Owan not siding with the Demon King was a ridiculous endeavor.

"The Demon King must be diligently searching for a way to neutralize the Immortals. Even if he knows the method right now, he won't use it immediately, but he will definitely want to have it in his grasp."

The side that absolutely had to use Scarlett's power.

The side that absolutely had to block Scarlett's power.

All of them must have started to move as soon as they confirmed that information.

It was rather strange that Archduke Saint Owan did not side with the Demon King, and it was only natural that the Demon King would have acted.

However, the result showed that Ludwig was faster.

"If we were faster, that would be a strange situation in itself."

Though the other party could have moved faster, the side that obtained the information later ended up being faster.

"No matter how quickly Scarlett returned to the temple, if those bastards were in collusion with Bertus, entering the temple would be no problem."

Everyone realized from Christina's words that they were more emotional than Christina herself and had failed to reach the obvious conclusion.

"But in the end… Scarlett is… being… protected… by our side…"

Anna said, her face distorted as if using the word "protection" left her with a miserable feeling.

Was it truly protection?

Wasn't it more like imprisonment and surveillance?

However, there was some truth to Anna's argument that there was no need to doubt, since Scarlett was ultimately in their custody.

"Yes, it's definitely fortunate. It's a lucky thing. But… that's why I'm asking. We must eliminate even the slightest possibility."

Christina looked towards Ludwig.

"Didn't you feel anything strange?"

Ludwig was the only one who had faced Scarlett directly.

If something was off, he was the only one who could confirm it.

Ludwig pondered.

Was it strange, or not?

Scarlett was undoubtedly terrified in the midst of an unknown situation.

She had said she needed time to think.

Then, after a brief moment of thought, she decided to follow Ludwig.

And so, in the end, Scarlett was taken.

Ludwig had a dangerous thought, wondering if Scarlett might have disappeared during that brief moment.

However, in the end, Scarlett had merely gone to the library to fetch a book and had not vanished.

She returned, dragging a large trunk.

Was that strange?

"…"

Should he be suspicious of such behavior?

It couldn't be called strange, but there was something.

He hadn't checked what was inside the trunk.

But should he have opened it and searched it, even though it probably only contained clothes or books?

Scarlett, who had accepted being confined without any explanation, was for her own good.

Was it really right to doubt her?

"No, there was nothing."

Ludwig's answer remained the same.

Christina asked.

"Are you sure?"

If they had to doubt Scarlett any further, it would be better to be betrayed.

"I'm sure."

Ludwig came to that conclusion.

However.

"That has to be the truth."

Under Christina's threatening gaze, Ludwig no longer had any response.

The Imperial Capital.

Imperial City Emperatos.

Central Palace Tetra.

"Now, it seems that everything is slipping out of my hands."

"Your Majesty."

"I may be able to control the Immortals for now, and the Allied Forces as well…"

The distance between the heart of the empire and the Allied Forces was great.

But that physical distance could be reduced at any time.

The Allied Forces could always be observed and manipulated as if they were in the palm of one's hand.

However, after the Demon King revealed his demonic power, the situation changed rapidly, and the Allied Forces were moving into an area beyond the Emperor's sight.

It was a natural phenomenon.

From the beginning, it was a situation induced not by the Demon King but by Bertus.

He had given the signal that it was time to start, and they had begun to move accordingly.

However, since the beginning of that induction, the situation was slipping out of Bertus's hands.

The Allied Forces were now physically and politically distant from the Emperor.

The leadership of the Allied Forces was in turmoil, and they would gradually be devoured by the Demon King.

The Immortals followed the Emperor's orders for the time being, but once everything reached its destination, they would no longer belong to the Emperor.

The empire was gradually losing power.

Saviolin Turner looked sternly at the Emperor, who had designed and orchestrated the situation to deliberately lose everything.

The Emperor was constantly losing something.

No.

To be precise, he was letting go of something.

One by one.

One by one.

He was not designing and arranging the situation to gain something, but to let go of

something.

The Emperor had not yet lost everything.

"Your Majesty still holds Shanafel and the Imperial Mage Corps. You have not lost everything."

The Emperor had too much to let go of all at once.

The Immortals were a very powerful army, but the empire had Shanafel and the Imperial Mage Corps. Those two forces were also formidable armies that could not be ignored.

Upon hearing Saviolin Turner's words, Bertus stared at her.

"That's the problem."

It was not a relief.

Rather, it was a problem, as the Emperor said, and Turner bit her lip.

"Why do I have to drag so many people down with me, even though I don't want to?"

The Emperor smirked.

The Emperor had too much, and some things could not be let go of, even if he wanted to.

The Emperor had a lot.

Some things could not be abandoned.

So.

The Emperor could not die alone, even if he wanted to.

"Lady Turner."

"…"

"If I asked you to disappear with the Imperial Mage Corps and Shanafel, would you do it?"

At those words, Saviolin Turner clenched her eyes shut.

"I don't understand… why it has to be like this. Why… you have to do this…"

Saviolin Turner had been a knight who had dedicated her entire life to the empire.

She had no other way to live.

She was someone who knew nothing of a life beyond that.

The Emperor's last command to such a knight was to abandon the empire.

In the end, clear tears began to flow between her tightly closed eyes.

"Your Majesty is too young. I don't understand why you have to bear such a burden… why it has to be you…"

What did being young and mature have to do with being an emperor?

An emperor must be an emperor.

Saviolin Turner, who had served the empire closely for a long time, knew how absurd her words were.

It was just regrettable.

He had dreamed of becoming an emperor, but he had not become one in the way he had wished.

Bertus had suddenly become an emperor without a proper coronation amidst the chaos of war.

The crown prince, who had longed to be an emperor, had fulfilled his wish to become one.

However, he had only become the emperor of an empire on the verge of collapse.

The last wish of such an emperor was singular.

To become the last emperor of humanity.

"Do you really need a reason to stay on a sinking ship until the end?"

When everyone was abandoning the ship, why did she have to stay on it until the end?

The last emperor of a vanishing nation.

Where could there be a reason to become a loyal subject in that grave?

The last emperor of the Gardias Royal Family.

He would be remembered as a dark tyrant in history, never to be repeated.

CHAPTER 647

“The day I saw with my own eyes the scene of an Immortal being created.”

Bertus spoke.

“Someone had to take responsibility for all of this.”

For a brief moment, Bertus and I had a conversation.

"We're not just talking about the responsibility for the Gate incident."

"Then, what responsibility?"

"The responsibility for the Great Demon War as well."

“Since everything began with the Great Demon War, we had to take responsibility for it from that moment on.”

That's what Bertus said.

From that conversation, it was clear who Bertus was referring to when he spoke of responsibility and its subject.

If the true cause of the Gate incident was the Great Demon War, then who was responsible for the Great Demon War?

It would be humanity.

However, not all of humanity was bearing responsibility; they were paying the price.

Someone had to take responsibility for everything.

So, humanity, who was the origin and beginning of it all.

The Gardias Imperial Family, who decided on that war.

The royal family must take responsibility, Bertus said.

"Did you start the Great Demon War?"

Obviously, the occurrence of the war was not a matter decided by Bertus.

And had that war ultimately occurred due to the unilateral decision of the Gardias Imperial Family?

Although the royal family started the war, it was bound to happen eventually. If it had been a war that no one wanted, the royal family would not have been able to mobilize such a large force in the first place.

"Do you remember when I said this long ago?"

"What did you say?"

"That everyone is equal beneath me."

Yes.

He had said that.

"But, I'm not here because I actually did something. I won't deny that."

"…"

"Just as you're the Demon King because you're an Archdemon, I was able to do that because I'm the son of the emperor."

Indeed, Bertus said he was above everyone else, but it wasn't because he was great that he said he was above everyone.

It was inherited.

Whether wise or incompetent, power is granted to the royal family.

It was not a matter of right or wrong, but simply how things were.

"If you're born holding glory unrelated to your own achievements, you must also

bear responsibility unrelated to your own achievements."

"…"

"If you enjoy glory and power, but claim that responsibility is not yours, isn't that a rather ridiculous and disgraceful act?"

If one was to deny responsibility, they should not have enjoyed inherited power and glory in the first place, since both were not derived from oneself.

"Now is the time to take responsibility. After all, I can't say that I had no role in all of this."

Being treated as a noble existence from the moment of birth was not due to one's greatness, but because it was inherited.

Therefore, one had to take responsibility for everything that happened due to the unrelated Great Demon War.

If one inherits power, one must also inherit responsibility.

In front of Bertus's solemn expression, I couldn't find the words to say.

If you have enjoyed glory unrelated to your own achievements, you must bear the responsibility.

Wasn't this story applicable not just to Bertus but to me as well?

Everything I had enjoyed because I created this world.

Then, shouldn't the responsibility for everything that happened in this world be mine, rather than Bertus's?

In the end, no matter how much was said, Bertus was a victim of my actions.

The fact that I was the perpetrator of all this remained unchanged.

"There's no need to make such an unfortunate expression."

I wondered what kind of expression I had been making.

Nonetheless, Bertus said so.

"Is it harder to let go of the world or to swallow it? Do you have to compare them to know?"

What Bertus had to do was difficult.

Then, was what I had to do easy?

"It might sound ridiculous, but just as I bear my own responsibilities, you'll have to bear yours too."

Yes.

That was right.

Letting go of the world.

Digesting the world.

Both would be difficult tasks, but the latter would be even harder.

There was a way for Bertus to take responsibility, and a way for me to take responsibility.

Bertus wasn't giving me the world.

He was passing the world on to me.

If I could manage the aftermath of the violence brought on by the emperor, the world would become mine, and I could survive.

But if I failed, even if the world didn't perish, everything I had and myself would be destroyed.

"I think you should be angry."

Bertus snickered, seemingly unable to comprehend why I was making such a strange expression.

"How odd."

Then, Bertus laughed.

He laughed as if he couldn't bear it without laughing.

I couldn't laugh in front of Bertus.

-Grrrrrrrrrr!

Back on the battlefield once more.

I swung my sword in the midst of hell, where flames, ice, and lightning boiled.

I didn't use Tiamata or Alsbringer.

-Kyaaaaaaak!

I vaporized a liquid-form monster that charged at me with just a glance, along with the flames.

Flames of Tuesday.

Many people mixed on the battlefield.

So they didn't know that everything happening originated from me.

I picked up a broken spear, its owner unknown, and charged toward the enemy lines.

-Kwajik!

The spear accurately pierced through the head of a huge monster that had been trampling soldiers on the battlefield.

-Krooooooo!

But it didn't fall.

There were countless times when what appeared to be the heads of differently-shaped monsters were not their weak points.

While not as much as Ellen.

I had killed countless monsters.

I dashed toward the still-standing monster and, at the same time, struck it with my fist.

-Ppoong!

The sound wasn't from my fist.

Strictly speaking, it was the sound of the magical shockwave I detonated the moment my fist made contact.

As half of the monster's body flew away in an instant, I passed by the bewildered soldiers who stared blankly at me.

There was a benefit to the Immortals appearing.

If I wore a helmet with a faceplate, I would be roughly considered one of the Immortals.

Even if a soldier they didn't know slaughtered monsters and advanced, they wouldn't think the Demon King was participating, but that it was a hidden force of the empire.

That's why it's better to wear a helmet than to move around with a transformed face.

Soldiers gawk at me but don't doubt me, and likewise, the Immortals don't doubt me either.

In the midst of the battlefield's noise and clamor.

As I watched the trajectory of the Void Sword cutting down monsters and advancing in the distance.

I, too, ran toward the Warp Gate as a part of the battlefield.

It wasn't just me.

Within the Immortals, there were also mages.

Golden light filled the battlefield, healing the wounded and casting blessings. Among the lights were the shots fired by Olivia Lanze.

And then.

-Flash!

In the rear of the battlefield, among the lights flying towards the city, there were those shot by Harriet.

-Rumble!

From the lightning pouring down from the sky, some were summoned by Liana.

How should one bear responsibility?

Just as one's life alone could not bear all responsibility, there must be various ways to bear responsibility.

Was this the right way to bear responsibility?

However, I did not want to bear the responsibility of death.

So, to pay the price or responsibility in another way.

I swung my weapons as if possessed.

Before arriving at the next major city after Wallen, Ruboten, the allied forces paused at a distance.

They waited until Immortal had taken care of all the warp gates in the smaller cities.

After Immortal had completed their mission, the allied forces advanced to Ruboten.

The battle was more intense than the one in Wallen, and the fighting itself took longer.

But in the end, there were fewer casualties than in Serandia.

The expressions of the allied forces as they looked upon the ashes of Ruboten were somewhat different from when they had successfully captured Serandia.

While it was a great victory with fewer casualties, it wasn't because the atmosphere was heavy with sadness.

There was only one left.

Now, the end was truly near.

Everyone knew this, and on their faces, a sense of solemnity was felt more than joy in victory.

Knowing that the moment they had longed for and wished for was not far away, the allied forces cleared the battlefield with a solemn atmosphere rather than being intoxicated by victory.

The clearing of the battlefield was the responsibility of the allied forces.

They returned to Lazac.

Liana shrugged her shoulders as she looked at me.

"But, did we really have to fight ourselves?"

"It's better than nothing."

"Well… You're not wrong."

At my words, Liana nodded with a gloomy expression.

He wanted to fight directly rather than just watch the battlefield from afar. He could have disguised himself as one of the allied soldiers using the Dreadfiend ring, but he did not participate in the battle since having an unknown but very powerful soldier would be strange.

However, after the appearance of Immortal, it was no longer strange for the allied forces to have an unknown but very powerful ally.

So, he had planned to join the battlefield wearing a simple helmet. He just had to avoid wearing the eye-catching Tiamata and Alsbringer.

But when he tried to go alone, Harriet, upon hearing it, decided to join as well.

As a result, not only Olivia but also Liana joined.

In the battlefield, they could fight with their faces hidden by helmets or robes, and even the Holy Knights were theirs, so it was easier for someone like Olivia to operate.

Moreover, Eleris and Lucinil joined the battle as well.

While it may not have been a significant number, it was better than nothing.

There was no harm in killing the monsters faster.

Whether or not it was meaningful to insert themselves anonymously into a battle they were bound to win, they did not know.

It was a victorious battle, but in the end, there were still deaths.

Some were injured, and some had died.

It was not I who killed the most monsters in today's battle, but rather Liana and Harriet.

Harriet stood silently on the open field in front of the Lazak Castle as night fell, staring down at the valley below with a stern expression on her face.

She must have had a lot on her mind.

-Eek! Eek…! Eek!

Meanwhile, Olivia sat on a rocky ledge in front of the castle, grumbling as she struggled to remove her plate armor, stained with monster blood.

“Ugh, so annoying!”

-Clang!

Olivia cursed as she threw her armor to the ground.

It was more like she tore it off than merely removed it.

"Can you believe I find her cute sometimes? Am I going insane?"

Liana laughed softly as she watched Olivia's antics.

Well, calling that cute might have been a stretch.

From a distance, Olivia glared at me with narrowed eyes.

“Reinhardt! Stop staring and help me out, you idiot! I couldn't even put this on by myself!”

"Alright."

I approached the grumbling Olivia and untied the knots in her armor.

"Why did you wear full plate armor instead of a simple breastplate like me?"

"Rowan, the commander of the Holy Knights, kept pestering me to wear it, so I did."

She must have sought out Commander Rowan right before the battle began.

"It's enchanted armor, so it does have some effects. Do you think the Holy Knights would wear something like this if they were fools?"

Olivia explained that the armor, blessed with divine power, enhanced physical abilities and sometimes magical power as well. Since she had disguised herself as a Holy Knight, like how I had disguised myself as a soldier, she had no choice but to wear plate armor.

Her platinum hair was tangled in every which way, making her look rather ghostly.

It was an inevitable consequence of close combat.

Although Liana and Harriet appeared slightly exhausted, they still looked radiant.

Eventually, Olivia was left in her undergarments once all her armor was removed.

Because she had to wear armor, her inner clothing was light and simple.

"…"

"…"

Uh.

Well.

Um…

"If you're going to look, either look properly or don't. You're making it even more indecent by looking like that."

Olivia glared at me with cold eyes.

"Ah, I didn't… I mean, I did look, but not like that…!"

"And I smell like blood right now. Don't come any closer."

"But you asked me to help you take off your armor!"

She tells me to come closer, then to go away! What's with her?

"That was then, this is now."

But really, Olivia did reek of blood, just as she said.

She glanced enviously at Harriet, who was still looking down at the valley from afar, before standing up.

"If I'm reborn, I'm going to learn magic… So annoying… Damn it…"

Leaving her armor strewn about, Olivia hobbled back into the castle.

As soon as she disappeared inside, Charlotte emerged.

"I heard the battle ended well."

Although our group's combat abilities were quite impressive, Charlotte's role was not on the battlefield. She was dressed in her most modest gown.

"Well… Fortunately."

We did participate in the battle, but ultimately, it was the Titans and the Immortals who played the biggest roles.

Charlotte crossed her arms and took a deep breath.

"Now… Only Diane remains."

"Yes."

At those words, I couldn't help but feel a cold sweat break out on my hands.

Now, the end was truly in sight.

The Immortals had taken care of all the other locations.

The capital of Riselen, Diane.

This was really the last one.

Only the final assault remained.

Everyone couldn't help but become solemn.

CHAPTER 648

The battle had ended.

As was always the case after an assault on a major city, they needed to clean up the monsters' corpses and kill the surviving creatures.

However, now the Immortals were carrying out that task.

They were an army that never tired and resurrected even when they died.

Thus, at that moment, the outskirts of the garrison were being patrolled by Immortal knights and mages, who were dealing with any remaining monsters.

Soon.

The outskirts of Ruboten were not only a coalition army garrison but also the domain of the Immortals.

It was a place where the living could not see.

Now it was impossible to tell whether a person was alive or dead.

Thwack! Splat… Gurgle!

Ellen, who had been hiding, precisely decapitated the mole-like monster that had charged at her while it was leaping towards her.

However, black blood spewed from the beheaded mole monster towards Ellen.

The color of the blood itself clearly showed that it was a dangerous substance that should not be touched.

The claws and teeth were not the only dangers of a monster.

But the blood didn't even touch Ellen.

Sizzle!

Before the blood could even reach Ellen's body, or her Aura Armor, a curtain of fire from the Sun Cloak evaporated the mole's blood.

"…"

Even without the two sacred relics, Ellen was strong.

However, the Void Sword Lament and the Sun Cloak Lapelt completed Ellen.

The Void Sword Lament, shaped like a piece of the night sky, cut through everything it touched.

And the Sun Cloak, now capable of unleashing fire, was originally a defensive weapon meant to protect its user.

The Lapelt detected 'threats.'

Even those who had reached the Master Class and were among the strongest of humanity were occasionally sacrificed to the unpredictable threats of monsters.

But the true power of the awakened Lapelt, whether Ellen knew it or not, protected her from all attacks that posed a threat to her.

It was as if the will of an all-knowing deity protected the user.

If a monster's breath was dangerous, it blocked the breath; if its blood was dangerous, it blocked the blood.

It blocked anything that was a 'threat.'

A sword that cut through anything.

A shield that blocked anything.

The perfection of both offense and defense was what made Ellen Artorius a true hero.

That's why, even in the most dangerous places on the battlefield, Lapelt could protect

Ellen against monstrous threats beyond common sense.

Because she could cut through anything and withstand any attack, Ellen went to the most dangerous places.

However, she didn't always just cut down giant monsters.

Small monsters, like the one now, were dangerous to someone else as well.

That's why, even after the battle ended, Ellen roamed the outskirts of the battlefield as if she were possessed, searching for monsters without anyone ordering her to do so.

She was always the first to enter the battlefield and the last to return.

Even now, as if she had become someone's puppet, Ellen repeated the same actions she had always done.

That's why, even though everyone knew Ellen was strange, they didn't know 'how much' stranger she had become.

She had always been a woman of few words, and her actions were no different from before.

"What's the point of you doing this? The Immortals can handle it, you know?" came a voice from behind her. Ellen slowly turned her head.

"Why don't you take a break?"

It was Christina, who had brought along two soldiers and two mages.

"…"

Ellen silently stared at Christina.

Christina tilted her head.

"You're really mysterious. I know the taste of battle."

"…"

"What happened?"

Ellen didn't respond to Christina's question.

"Have you gone mute?"

Despite Christina's urging for some sort of reaction, Ellen remained silent.

Christina narrowed her eyes as she stared at Ellen, who was as unresponsive as a lifeless doll.

"Did you lose it in a different way than me?"

"…"

It was ordinary for people to fall apart after enduring horrible experiences.

It was unusually strong for those who remained intact.

Ellen, who had spent time in the most dreadful and perilous places, might have naturally fallen apart.

And so, Christina thought that must be why Ellen had ended up in this state.

Despite Christina's continuous taunting, there was no reaction from Ellen.

There was no sign of displeasure.

It didn't even seem like Ellen was ignoring her.

Christina frowned as she looked at the unresponsive Ellen.

Yet, Ellen didn't leave her spot.

She simply stared at Christina.

"You've become unlucky in a very different way than before."

"…"

"Well, I actually came to make a proposal to you."

Ellen remained silent.

"You know about the Immortal, right?"

Finally, for the first time, a semblance of a response appeared.

-Nod

"Oh, so you've been listening?"

Though it was a simple expression of intention by nodding, Christina recognized that Ellen was indeed listening.

"I won't explain in detail since you're busy."

Christina smiled.

"Be my hostage."

Ellen stared silently at Christina's malicious grin.

"If I have you with me, he'll surely show his face."

He would try to reclaim her by any means necessary.

If Ellen was with her, a certain being would definitely come looking.

He was hiding somewhere, plotting in secret, and his whereabouts were unknown.

No one could search the entire world thoroughly enough.

He could hide forever and never be found.

That's why she needed to secure a sacrifice to summon the Demon King.

"Ellen, you'll have to be the bait to catch the Demon King."

"…”

Christina smiled.

She would take her as a hostage.

But she had no intention of stopping there.

"Of course, when the Demon King comes looking for you…"

Christina started laughing, as if the mere thought delighted her.

"It'll be too late to turn back."

The moment the Demon King revealed himself to save his hostage.

What he would see wouldn't be a living Ellen Artorius, but Ellen who had become an Immortal.

What would the Demon King say, seeing the Ellen who had been revived by an irreversible death and turned into a mere shell?

The feeling of having something taken away.

The feeling of facing something irreversible.

She intended to make him feel the same way.

"Capture her."

Christina ordered.

Unaware that they were trying to turn an already empty shell into an empty shell once more.

It didn't take long.

About 30 seconds.

An Immortal wielding a sword and an Immortal casting magic.

All it took was that much time for the four Immortals to be neutralized, either by having their heads severed, their bodies split in half, or their waists broken.

The Void Sword cuts through everything it touches, leaving nothing behind.

And all attacks were neutralized by Lapelt.

Even the aura armor of Master Classes was nothing more than a blood stain in front of the blade of the Void Sword.

Nothing could withstand the cutting power of the Void Sword unless it was a sacred artifact.

That was why Ellen simply swung and defended.

Christina stared wide-eyed as the fallen Immortal vanished with a flash of light.

Was this not enough?

The Immortals that Christina had summoned wer among the top tier of all Immortals.

Ancient heroes who have reached the rank of Grandmaster couldn't withstand Ellen for even 30 seconds.

If these four were so easily neutralized, summoning more Immortals would not change the outcome.

"What is this…?"

Ellen simply stared at Christina after cutting down two Grandmasters and two Archmages.

Only then did Christina realize how unfair a divine artifact could be.

Not only Ellen but also the divine artifact.

She couldn't help but feel how irrational the Void Sword Lament was.

Ellen clearly reacted to the attacks directed at her.

Now, after suppressing the Immortals, Ellen slowly began walking towards Christina.

In front of the approaching Ellen, Christina retreated while casting a spell.

She summoned an Immortal.

Flash!

In response to Christina's will, dozens of Immortals began to block Ellen through short-range spatial teleportation.

However, it was meaningless.

Swish!

With just one swing of the Void Sword, the Immortals were cut down along with their aura armor.

Boom!

Lightning and electric strikes were blocked by a wall of flames.

An impossible situation where fire blocked electricity was created.

"How… How can this be…?"

Crash!

Neither swords nor magic could penetrate the fiery barrier surrounding Ellen, let alone her aura armor.

But the Void Sword cut through everything in its path.

It was a mistake.

The Demon King wasn't the problem.

Ellen was the problem.

Holding the Void Sword and wearing the Sun Cloak, no force or magic would matter

in front of Ellen Artorius.

The only reason they could underestimate Ellen so far was because she still had humanity left in her.

It was impossible to bring Ellen Artorius, without any hesitation, to her knees through force alone.

Only then did Christina realize.

In the end, an alchemist was still an alchemist.

Her life had revolved around the laboratory and her desk.

She had no experience in actual combat or even witnessing a battle.

Yet, having the ability to command over a thousand Archmages and Master Classes as if they were her own limbs, she believed nothing could stand before her.

Why a hero was a hero.

What kind of object a divine artifact really was.

She knew it in her mind, but she had never seen it with her own eyes.

The twenty Immortals summoned by Christina were neutralized and disappeared as quickly as the first ones.

Christina blankly watched Ellen approach.

Not in a hurry.

As if to say, try to escape if you want.

Slowly closing in.

Just as Christina finally tried to dodge.

Swoosh!

Ellen, who had approached without being noticed, grabbed Christina's neck with one hand.

Ellen's movements were not something a deskbound person like Christina, who had never experienced real combat, could perceive and understand.

"Gah… ugh!"

A skilled battle mage might be able to cast spatial teleportation despite the pain of having their neck gripped, but that didn't apply to Christina.

Battle mages had chosen their path because they had lower talent and potential among magicians.

Among mages, there was no reason for the elite class to have real battle experience.

So, it was only natural that Christina couldn't see Ellen's movements, react to them, or use magic while in pain.

The formulas she had been thinking about became twisted and went awry in the suffocating situation.

She couldn't breathe.

It hurt.

It felt like she was going to die.

How could one calmly use magic with only these thoughts in mind?

How could battle mages do that?

Christina realized how difficult the task she once looked down upon really was.

How powerless she was.

It was too late to realize how arrogant it had been to stand in front of Ellen.

Ellen had shown her, without a word, how foolish it had been for an alchemist who wasn't even a battle mage to rely on the power of immortals and act so arrogantly.

Just by being gripped at the neck, all her magic had been sealed, and she could no longer call forth immortals.

After all, calling immortals was also magic.

"Ugh…"

In the suffocating situation, Christina struggled to free herself from Ellen's grip on her neck.

But even with all her strength, she couldn't move even one of Ellen's fingers.

Everything was meaningless in the face of such an overwhelming difference in power.

The immortals themselves had been swept away by the void sword, so there was no way Christina could control even one of Ellen's fingers.

"If you kill me… you'll… regret it…"

In the end, Ellen just watched Christina as she made such a pathetic threat.

Just before Christina ran out of breath,

-Thud

Ellen suddenly let her go.

"Cough! Gasp! Gasp! Gasp! Gasp!"

Christina, gasping for air on the floor, was still being watched by Ellen.

Her gaze was emotionless.

Not even a contemptuous look, as if looking down on trash.

"Hic! Hic! Hic!"

Gasping for breath, Christina still couldn't escape.

She needed to run.

She had to run.

But the thought filled her head, and her magic continued to fail.

Even though she wasn't being choked anymore.

The pressure and fear made it impossible to use magic.

How could one do this?

How could magic be used in battle?

How could anyone do that?

How could a human be so strong?

Christina couldn't help but tremble in fear as she experienced these things firsthand.

No matter how justified her anger or hatred,

The weak were weak, and the strong were strong.

Those who did not know how to fight couldn't understand it.

One could plan and scheme, but one should have known their place and acted accordingly.

If one recklessly stepped forward without knowing their place, they would suffer.

Ellen watched Christina, who was gasping for breath and crumpled like trash, completely powerless just because her airway had been blocked for a moment.

Then, Ellen's mouth, which had never opened before, opened.

"You still have some use."

"Ugh…!"

-Ziiiiing!

Christina couldn't hear the words coming from Ellen's mouth at all.

It was a small voice.

However, it had a strange resonance, as if it was a mix of tens of thousands of voices.

Amidst the pain that felt like the voice itself was tearing her brain apart, Christina writhes.

It was just a fraction of what Ellen had endured.

But Christina couldn't bear even a single voice, the overwhelming resentment of the souls, and had no choice but to crouch and tremble.

"I'll spare your life."

"Ughhhhh!"

To Christina, Ellen had become something unimaginable.

Even simple violence.

Even just a simple voice.

Christina couldn't handle it.

The only saving grace was that Christina didn't have to pay the price of her arrogance with her life.

Ellen left the unconscious Christina on the ground, littered with monster corpses, and returned to the alliance's garrison.

CHAPTER 649

The allied forces would be stationed for about three days to regroup.

A few days passed as they continued to wrap up the aftermath of the battle.

Royal Class garrison, Cliffman's barracks.

"Why does it feel like we're busier after the battle is over?"

Late at night, Erich brought a piece of bread from somewhere and lay down on a mat, mumbling to himself.

"Are there many wounded?"

At Lint's question, Erich looked over at him.

"When have there not been many?"

Erich, who could use divine magic, had been working tirelessly to heal people.

In the barracks were Erich, Cliffman, and also Cayer and Lint – the four of them.

As always, Cliffman lay on his makeshift bed, staring blankly at the tent.

With Heinrich added to the mix, they almost always gathered like this.

Of course, Cliffman had never once suggested using his barracks as a sort of hideout.

At some point, Kono Lint began to frequent Cliffman's barracks, followed by Cayer and Erich who came looking for Lint, and Heinrich sat down after searching for the others.

Cliffman never had much to say about it.

"Where's Heinrich?"

At Lint's question, Cayer tilted his head.

"He's usually with his sister. There's probably a lot for him to do as royalty."

Erich stared at him, still lying down, at Cayer's words.

“…Even if Heinrich is with the temple, his sister is the commander of Kernstadt and the future queen. Is it okay for us to call her 'sister' so casually?"

“…Is it?"

Suddenly faced with this question, not only Cayer but also Erich tilted their heads.

"Is this disrespectful?"

Could commoners and royalty address each other so informally if they were friends with the royal siblings?

They all began to ponder this unexpected dilemma.

They decided to ask Heinrich when he returned.

"Only one more left."

Word had spread that all other regions had been pacified.

Everyone knew that the capital of Riselen, Diane, was their final destination.

At Lint's words, everyone's expressions turned solemn.

"When the war is over, I want to visit all the people who have sent me letters."

Lint's words made Erich's expression uneasy.

“…Do you remember all those people?"

"I've kept the letters, so I should be able to find the ones with addresses, right?"

"Why would you bother going to see them in person?"

"Well… I'm curious about how they're doing… and if they're safe…"

As Lint stumbled over his words and Erich asked why he would go to such trouble, Cayer clicked his tongue.

"This guy probably wants to see if there are any pretty girls."

"Ah…"

"Ah, no! I have! Pure! Intentions!"

It was hard not to see through Kono Lint's flimsy cover.

Of course, no one knew what his true intentions were, but Kono Lint began to chuckle.

"If there happens to be something like that… and if there's someone I want to see…"

Smack!

"Ouch!"

Before he could finish his sentence, Kono Lint received a powerful blow to the back of his head, causing his eyes to bulge as he rolled on the ground.

The one who had suddenly struck Lint's head was Cliffman.

"Why did you hit me out of the blue?"

Kono Lint shouted, having received an unexpected blow to the back of his head.

"Shut up, people who talk like that always end up dead."

"Huh? What kind of superstition is that?"

"Anyway, let's talk about it after everything is over."

At that moment, everyone looked at the suddenly serious Cliffman with wide eyes.

Rustle

"Oh, everyone's here."

Heinrich entered Cliffman's tent.

Kono Lint looked at Heinrich, rubbing the back of his head.

"Have you finished your business?"

"Yeah, more or less."

Heinrich sat down on one of the chairs inside the tent.

Since Heinrich had arrived, the topic they were discussing earlier had to come up.

In the end, it was a pointless conversation.

Whether they should treat Louise, their friend's sister, as a close friend or respect her as a noble, and whether Louise would be upset if they called Heinrich casually in front of her, and so on.

Hearing the question, Heinrich furrowed his brow.

“…Why on earth are you curious about that?"

"Just because."

"Yeah, just because."

There was no grand reason or purpose for asking, they were just curious.

What kind of meaningful conversations could friends have, anyway? Most of their talks were casual and without any particular reason.

"Come to think of it, except for Erich, everyone else here… is a commoner."

Everyone in this place, except for Heinrich and Erich de Lafaeri, came from commoner backgrounds.

"You just realized that now?"

"I didn't just realize it, it just feels strange."

Heinrich had almost forgotten his background, so thinking about it felt odd.

"I think my sister wouldn't mind how you treat me… And her as well…"

Heinrich thought that Louise wouldn't care much about such things either.

He didn't know their mother well, but Heinrich didn't think Louise was strict about social status.

"Well, come visit Kernstadt after the war is over. There won't be much leisure time, but we won't treat you poorly."

Heinrich said.

"…"

"…"

"…"

Everyone fell silent and looked at Cliffman.

Kono Lint had just been hit in the back of his head for talking about the end of the war.

"…So what?"

Cliffman replied.

"Why do you let him off the hook when you hit me so hard!"

Naturally, Lint couldn't help but be angry after being hit for just one wrong word.

"Is it because you can't hit royalty even though they don't say anything? Huh?"

"Be quiet. I didn't hit him because he was too far away."

In fact, Kono Lint was sitting next to Cliffman's makeshift bed, and Heinrich was too

far away to hit him in the back of his head.

“…What on earth are you guys talking about?"

Naturally, Heinrich couldn't understand the situation and didn't know what they were discussing.

"No, they say that those who talk about what they'll do after the war before it ends will die!"

“…Ah, that's what you were talking about?"

It was impossible to know if the superstition was true or not.

"It's not a good attitude to talk about the next thing before it's over. There's nothing good about relaxing."

Heinrich nodded as if he understood what Cliffman was saying.

The moment they relaxed because the end was approaching, they could lose everything and their lives.

And Diane was their final destination, as well as the most dangerous place.

An incomparable number of people would die compared to before.

Thus, it was absurd to discuss what would come after everything had ended. After hesitating for a moment, Heinrich cautiously added more.

"And, even if the Gate Incident comes to an end, it won't be the end of everything…”

At Heinrich's words, Erich looked at him.

"What do you mean? It's not the end even if the Gate Incident is resolved?"

"…”

Heinrich fell silent in response to the question.

For quite some time.

As Heinrich suddenly remained quiet for so long, everyone had no choice but to look at him.

It wasn't a look of having nothing to say, but rather, it was clear he was choosing his words carefully.

"Now, there's something you all need to know."

This wasn't a signal for casual chatter among friends, but for a very important conversation.

Heinrich was the only one in this gathering with remaining royal authority.

Thus, Heinrich, although a friend in this setting, was the only person who could access information from the high ranks of the allied forces.

Heinrich looked around.

"Lint, take us somewhere far away from the allied base."

“…Suddenly?"

"I'll tell you later; just don't ask anything for now."

For everyone present, it was their first time seeing Heinrich so serious.

Due to the sudden change in Heinrich's demeanor, everyone felt that it wasn't a situation for jest.

As Heinrich requested, Kono Lint brought each person to a place very far from the allied base.

A place where the lights of the base could be seen from afar.

Naturally, it was a conversation that others couldn't overhear.

There was nothing to illuminate the surroundings, except for the uneasy moonlight.

"Hey, why are you acting so scary?"

Even Cayer asked with a stern expression due to the changed atmosphere.

Everyone focused on Heinrich.

"As I said, everything won't be resolved just because the Gate Incident comes to an end."

Everyone was only looking at that.

Once the Gate Incident ended, people would finally be liberated from the fear of monsters.

But that wasn't the case.

"Of course, everything won't end just because the Gate Incident ends. We still need to deal with all the remaining monsters on the continent. That's an uncertain task as well."

Lint's words were true and undeniable.

"Yeah, you're right. But I'm talking about something else right now."

While Heinrich was pondering how to broach the subject,

"Are you talking about the Demon King?"

The previously silent Cliff cautiously opened his mouth.

Seeing everyone else fall silent, and Heinrich staring at Cliff with wide eyes,

"That's the only thing it could be."

Cliff had some idea about what topic would come up.

"…"

And, Kono Lint, who had been pretending not to know, couldn't help but harden his expression.

The topic of the Demon King had to be addressed at some point, and the Demon King's affairs would inevitably surface.

With the Gate Incident resolved and the remaining monsters dealt with, the undeniable reality was that they would have to think about the Demon King's business.

"That's right."

Heinrich finally broke his silence.

"Right now, more than half of the allied forces have sworn loyalty to the Demon King."

“…What?"

"What did you say?"

However, everyone couldn't help but forget their words at Heinrich's shocking revelation.

“My sister had also decided to follow the Demon King.”

Upon hearing his next shocking news, everyone couldn't help but want to deny reality.

There was no one who wouldn't be surprised by the news that a considerable number of the coalition's high command had already sided with the Demon King.

Even within the coalition, obtaining information from the headquarters was difficult unless one was a special case like Heinrich or Ellen, despite the fact that the members of the Temple, especially the Royal Class, received special treatment.

However, to understand why the coalition had chosen to side with the Demon King, there were several things that had to be considered first.

The massive riots and massacres in the Imperial City.

The army of the dead, the Immortals.

The increasingly precarious position of the Empire.

And the movements of the Holy Knights and the Five Great Religious Orders.

Heinrich explained everything he had seen and heard upon his return to the Imperial City, the events he had been involved in, the secrets he had discovered, and the overall situation that had unfolded so far.

“That army… is made of… undead warriors?”

Cayer muttered blankly.

“Not just warriors, but also the deceased heroes of the past.”

Historical figures had been resurrected as undead and were fighting alongside them.

The true identity of the mysterious allied forces turned out to be a more terrifying and formidable army than anyone could have imagined, leaving everyone speechless.

However, Kono Lint's reaction was bound to be different.

Although he didn't know the specifics, Kono Lint was aware that the Empire's scheme was related to resurrecting the heroes of the past as undead.

That's why he had some idea about the true identity of the Immortals. It was just that he couldn't tell anyone.

There was one new piece of information.

Christina, Louis Ancton, and Anna de Gerna were deeply involved in the creation of the Immortals.

Not just deeply involved, but practically core members.

“What have they been doing…”

They were B-class, but they were classmates.

He had thought they didn't do much on the battlefield, but they had been working on the most important tasks while hiding it from everyone.

“So, did Kernstadt side with the Demon King because they thought the Empire might collapse after the Gate incident?”

At Cliffman's question, Heinrich fell silent for a moment.

“Yes, whatever reason you attach to it, you're right. Now, people within the coalition are wondering whether they should side with the Empire or the Demon King to survive. And my sister has already made her choice.”

It was no longer a matter of right or wrong, but survival.

After the Gate incident, they would have to choose between the Demon King or the Empire.

Such a choice could be made by the leader of a group or, in some cases, even by each individual.

Erich muttered blankly.

“This… this doesn't make sense… The Demon King wants to rule the world? Is that even possible?”

There was a mix of horror and disbelief in Erich's words, as if people wouldn't just stand by and let it happen.

“Whether it's possible or not, it's already halfway done. People just don't know it yet.”

“While the high command may be able to make that decision, whether others can accept it is another issue.”

At Cliffman's words, Heinrich nodded.

“That's a problem for that time. Anyway, what I want to say is, now is the time to make a choice.”

The Demon King or the Empire.

A choice had to be made.

Now that the end of the Gate Incident had arrived, they had to recognize that another problem existed and think about it as well.

"It's impossible."

Then, the silent Cayer Voiden quietly opened his mouth.

"All of this happened because of him, the one who we couldn't find nor know what he was doing all this time. He's trying to swallow humanity and is actually succeeding? That can't be."

In front of Cayer's restrained anger, Heinrich fell silent.

"Creating such an army might be a problem. It was a mistake. It must be a sin, indeed. But if the Gate Incident hadn't occurred, none of this would have happened. Yet, you're saying we should follow someone who wants to live and take everything away after just watching from the sidelines? That's… That's impossible. It can't be…"

"He didn't do nothing."

The one who cut into Cayer's words wasn't Heinrich.

Only two in the room had met the Demon King directly after the Gate Incident.

Heinrich von Schwarz.

And there was Kono Lint as well.

"To be honest… I met Reinhardt last time."

Heinrich, who had surprised everyone, was now the one who couldn't help but be astonished.

Just as Heinrich had something hidden from everyone, Kono Lint also had something he concealed.

The deployment of the Immortals to the frontlines was recent, and even before that, suspicious events continued on the march.

Cities that were destroyed after suffering preemptive attacks.

Kono Lint found those incidents suspicious and went on reconnaissance, where he saw unidentified people fighting far ahead of the allied forces.

And he learned that they were the Demon King's army.

He was then kidnapped by one of Reinhardt's subordinates and woke up in Reinhardt's castle.

Afterward, he briefly spoke with Reinhardt.

There was no detailed explanation, but he had been moving because he wanted to stop the Gate Incident.

Now that everything was in disarray, he was doing his best to end the Gate Incident.

It couldn't be a lie. Lint had really seen with his own eyes Reinhardt leading his army and fighting ahead of the allied forces.

"So all those things that happened last year… were all done by the Demon King's army?"

"That's right. Now, it seems like they aren't moving because of the Immortals."

Cayer, who had been furious, couldn't help but lose his anger at Lint's explanation.

"The Gate Incident happened because of Reinhardt. But he never wanted it. That much is clear."

He hadn't been just standing by and watching.

He had been doing something in places where people couldn't see.

"But back then, he said that if others knew his truth, it would cause more problems, so it was better to leave it alone… He asked me to keep this a secret. That's what he said."

Clearly, if the truth was something that would lead to the ruin and division of people, it was better for it not to be revealed.

So, Kono Lint remained silent.

"But now the situation has changed. If the empire were prosperous, it wouldn't matter, but with the empire on the verge of collapse and the situation worsening… I guess there's no choice but to step in."

"That's probably true."

This was the first time Heinrich had heard a detailed account of the background, so he agreed with Cliff's speculation.

"Anyway, he sent me here safely. We did meet one more time afterward, though…"

"One more time?"

"Ah, umm…"

Kono Lint's face couldn't help but turn red.

After that, Lint met Reinhardt again.

He had asked for help with an issue related to the undead, but there was one reason his face turned red.

"I was… deceived… by the beauty."

It wasn't because the Demon King had asked him to come, but because he had been tricked by the situation in which Sarkegaar, transformed into a beautiful girl, had lured him into seeing him. That was the problem.

CHAPTER 650

Everyone was shocked by the tale of the deceiving beauty, but the following content was even more astonishing.

The Demon King's army had attempted to rob the royal mausoleum in order to replenish their Death Knights.

To infiltrate the palace, they needed the assistance of Kono Lint.

Lint had helped the Demon King.

However, all the coffins were empty.

So they went to the imperial national cemetery, but all the corpses there had been replaced.

It was clear that something sinister was happening within the empire.

After replenishing the Death Knights from the underground tombs of the saints of the Holy Knight Order, the Demon King warned Lint not to investigate further as it might be dangerous, and then disappeared.

Heinrich couldn't help but widen his eyes at Kono Lint's words.

"That… was it you who did that?"

The incident that involved Ellen, Heinrich, Louise, and Ludwig.

In the end, the real culprit behind the case remained unknown.

Heinrich couldn't help but open his mouth at the revelation that the incident at the saints' cemetery was actually the work of Kono Lint and the Demon King.

He had somewhat suspected the Demon King.

However, it was shocking that Kono Lint was involved.

"So… it wasn't a good thing… but I thought it was necessary. I don't regret it."

Lint looked at Cayer.

"That brat is the cause of everything, but he didn't do nothing. He tried to do something. Like this now… unlike what I said last time. Reaching out to the allied forces like this… there must be a clear reason for it."

"Such a thing…"

Cayer couldn't see for himself that the one who did nothing tried to swallow everything.

Moreover, Kono Lint had even helped the Demon King to some extent.

Cayer was at a loss for words.

"You, but… huh…"

Erich, who had been still, stared blankly at Kono Lint.

Kernstadt's choice was for survival.

But Kono Lint spoke as if he trusted the Demon King.

It was a qualitatively different issue.

It would be cowardly to join the Demon King for the sake of survival, but trusting the Demon King and joining him could be seen as just madness.

"Surely, trusting the Demon King… is a bit strange. Yes. It can't be helped but to think that way…"

At Lint's words, Erich lowered his head.

"No, not that…"

As if it wasn't that perspective, Erich looked at Lint.

"How could you not have said anything until now?"

“…Huh?"

At Erich's unexpected words, not only the dumbfounded Cayer but also Heinrich nodded.

"I also find that the most surprising right now."

Even Cliffman said so.

Certainly, Kono Lint's ability itself was an ability, so he had many stories picked up here and there.

So whenever something happened, he habitually relayed information about what had happened and what was happening where.

It was inevitable to be astonished that such a person had kept such a big secret until now without any hint or expression.

"Are you saying… I'm tight-lipped now?"

Kono Lint was confused as he looked at his friends who were flustered by something that they should not have been.

"Didn't you know until now?"

"I can't stand it anymore, you bastards! What do you think of me?"

Kono Lint couldn't help but be outraged at being treated like a pushover.

A surprising fact to everyone.

Kono Lint was a man who knew when to keep his mouth shut.

Seeing the spectacle, Heinrich let out a bitter laugh.

Kono Lint had his own secret.

"I've met him too."

“…What?"

He thought he had disappeared without a trace, but that wasn't the case.

Surprisingly, Reinhardt had been sneaking around here and there. It was just that those who had met Reinhardt were keeping the secret.

"You too?"

Kono Lint couldn't help but be shocked as well.

"It's different from you. I didn't help him… rather, I received help."

"You received help?"

Kono Lint had to cooperate with the Demon King, half willingly and half unwillingly.

However, Heinrich's case was different.

But in this case, it was a very difficult subject to mention.

“…If it weren't for Reinhardt, I might have died."

Yes, because he had to talk about his brothers' deaths.

The topic Heinrich brought up couldn't help but be heavy.

Because he had to talk about a very distant past.

The story of when he was so young he couldn't remember, awakening his abilities and burning his brothers to death.

And being expelled to the Empire's temple as if driven out.

That's why he couldn't help but earn the hatred of his other brothers.

So that his friends could understand the situation in which his brothers tried to kill him, he had no choice but to tell the dark past entirely.

And the brothers who became jealous and hated him for becoming a war hero.

The letter from an anonymous friend, warning that he would be killed by his brothers.

The suspicion he heard from the Emperor, that he might be a bastard.

In the end, when the conflict reached its peak, Reinhardt came to find Heinrich.

He suggested they leave together, as he might be killed as things were. He said that he could explain everything and discuss what they could do together.

Heinrich didn't follow Reinhardt.

As he pondered whether to tell the truth about being a bastard, Heinrich couldn't help but tell about his mother, although he felt guilty.

Now was the moment to tell everything.

When his sister killed their brothers with her own hands, Heinrich learned that his older sister was actually his mother.

All of his friends who heard the story couldn't help but be shocked.

"Although Reinhardt didn't save me directly, he tried to save me. The actions I took because of that letter… ultimately made it possible for me to survive."

In fact, Heinrich was almost killed. Only Louise, who had spoken with the Emperor, knew that such an attempt would happen and stopped it.

Although Reinhardt didn't save Heinrich directly, if it weren't for that letter, Heinrich would have died.

"I don't expect you to understand, but the reason my sister… no, my mother, sided with the Demon King is… because she knows that."

She knows the Demon King tried to save her son.

That's why she could save him.

It's true that she made the choice for survival in a situation where she had to live.

But the fact that she knew the truth, that her son could survive to this day thanks to the Demon King, also played a significant role.

Because Louise had undoubtedly experienced something that could not be denied as the Demon King's grace.

Just as Louise thought.

Heinrich thought the same.

He had truly been loved.

The reason he had not died.

The fact that he had been able to live, and knew the truth that the woman he had believed to be his older sister, turned out to be his mother, and had pleaded with the king to spare his life, was all due to a letter sent by the Demon King.

It was difficult for everyone to bring up certain words.

The people he had believed to be his brothers were actually his uncles.

These uncles had tried to kill the boy they had mistaken for the youngest, who was in fact the son of their sister.

And the mother protected her son.

"I don't know how Reinhardt anticipated the circumstances under which I would die, but he… he certainly didn't want me to die. He might have tried to use me, but… No matter how I think about it, that doesn't seem right. And considering his actions towards you, Lint, he just… wanted us to be safe. He wanted everyone to be happy. Even though things didn't go exactly as he wished, he still hoped for it. That much is certain."

In the end, it was Heinrich who had first brought up the entire story, looking at everyone.

"Whether the real cause of the Gate incident was due to Reinhardt or not… Yeah, Reinhardt might have been wrong. Even if the Demon King does something, it's not certain that it will always lead to a good outcome. I know that too."

Whether the Demon King was right or wrong.

As in the past, it was still something they could not know.

Everything would be revealed by the outcome, and so it was meaningless to predict the result now.

"So, I never thought I would say this, but…"

When he had been treated like a stepping stone or a mere bonfire, Heinrich had sincerely wanted to kill Reinhardt.

That's why, it was most unbelievable for Heinrich himself to say these words now.

"I trust Reinhardt."

He had not revealed his name, but he had received a worried letter from a friend.

Now, he had to send a reply of trust in the name of friendship.

It was still unknown whether the Demon King was right or wrong.

But, he believed.

There had been too many incidents where he could not help but trust Reinhardt.

And so, he followed.

In order to survive, Käernstadt had chosen the Demon King, an explanation that could not be taken any other way.

But now that all the stories had come to an end.

Heinrich said he followed not to live, but because he trusted Reinhardt.

How long did the silence last?

"Me too."

Among those who had been silent, Kono Lint spoke.

"I also want to trust that bastard."

Someone, somewhere, as a prince, believed in the Demon King.

Someone, somewhere, as an ordinary person, believed in the Demon King.

Although people have their own statuses, does faith have a status?

Although those gathered here were special soldiers, they were ultimately no more than soldiers.

It was unknown how much their belief or disbelief in the Demon King would affect the overall situation.

However, the time had come when they needed to share such stories.

At this moment when everyone was choosing sides, regardless of their will, they had to stand somewhere.

Would they trust the Empire, or trust the Demon King?

Would the Empire survive, or would the Demon King survive?

It was merely a matter of choosing based on faith or survival.

"Regardless of whether we believe or not, are we saying that another war will break out after the Gate incident is over…?"

At Cliffman's words, everyone fell silent.

What Reinhardt wanted, whether they believed or not, was a separate matter.

In the end, as one cataclysm came to a close, there was no time to catch their breath before another storm began anew.

Not everyone could side with the Demon King.

Nor could everyone side with the Empire.

"Must we choose one of the two…?"

At Cayer's words, Heinrich shook his head.

"We can choose neither as well."

“…What?"

"Exactly as I said."

Choosing nothing at all.

"There are people who wish for both the Empire and the Demon King to disappear."

Choosing nothing could, of course, still be a choice.

"Then… what should we do?"

Erich asked.

What should they do?

Did they hope for the demise of everyone, whether they were cowardly or not, and regardless of their choices?

At Erich's question, Heinrich laughed bitterly.

"There's no way to know what to do."

It was merely retribution.

It was merely judgment.

Everyone would have to figure out what to do afterward. The guilty had to be judged and punished.

Heinrich knew that those who thought this way were their biggest enemies right now.

Cliffman, who had been silent, spoke.

"Heinrich, I have a question."

“…What is it?"

"Ludwig's arm."

“…Ah."

Cliffman asked.

"Is it related to the Immortal?"

He had undergone some sort of procedure.

Christina, Louis Ancton, and Anna, who were involved with the Immortals.

Something about Ludwig's atmosphere had changed.

At last, the pieces of the puzzle that had been missing seemed to fit together.

"Undoubtedly, it must be."

Heinrich nodded at Cliffman's question.

As long as they knew what an Immortal was, Ludwig's restored arm must be related to it.

So it couldn't be an ordinary arm, and Ludwig was not in a normal state either.

Everyone here would eventually have to make a choice.

The difference was whether they would choose to survive or choose out of faith.

Unlike the two who had already made their decisions, he was one of those who couldn't help but agonize over the choice.

"Could you, by any chance, relay a message for me?"

Cliffman said that.

Charlotte and I sat facing each other in the King's office, which had become the Regent’s office.

"Hmm…”

"Um…”

Both Charlotte and I had ambiguous expressions.

It was Charlotte who opened her mouth first.

"In truth, there isn't really a problem. Many unspecified people already know that we are involved in the allied forces, and there are factions that do not side with us. Our involvement was bound to spread throughout the allied forces."

"I knew that."

As Charlotte said, there were those who had reasons to keep the secret, but there were also those who had no reason to do so and knew about the involvement of the Demon King's allied forces.

Until recently, I thought that if such a fact spread throughout the allied forces, it could collapse.

In reality, just because the commanders cooperated with me to survive didn't mean everyone followed the commanders' decisions.

However, with the final battle looming and the majority of the actual forces being Immortals, even if the allied forces collapsed, there might not be a significant problem.

It was a matter of whether suspicion and discord would lead to division first or reaching the final battlefield first.

The current situation was the impossible coexistence of the Demon King's followers and the Empire’s forces

Fortunately, they were not far from the capital city of Riselen, Diane.

The divide would only come after the fall of Diane.

And the rumors of the Demon King's involvement had not spread too far.

One of those involved in the upper echelons had spread the rumor.

"I don't know about the rest, but this Heinrich guy, he didn't get beaten by his mother, did he?"

“…Perhaps."

Charlotte seemed to agree with my harsh expression, nodding her head.

In a sense, Heinrich had caused an accident.

"And what's with reporting the accident to his mother?"

“…Indeed."

Heinrich obviously knew that Kernstadt had decided to be on our side. In fact, it was neither me nor Rowan who brought in other small countries or minor factions, but Louise von Schwarz.

Because of that, she was exposed to considerable danger. She was essentially in a more dangerous position than Rowan, playing the role of a frontman on the front line, so it was only natural that she would be plagued by assassination threats.

Louise took all of that into account and continued to serve as our frontman.

In the midst of all this, Heinrich told his friends about Kernstadt's betrayal.

"Like you said, Charlotte… It's not a big accident since it was bound to happen eventually…”

"I can't say I don't understand. And Heinrich did it with your best interests in mind. The outcome seems to be good, too."

"That's true."

I couldn't say that I didn't understand Heinrich's feelings, nor could I say that his

actions were necessarily foolish.

In the end, he was thinking of both me and his friends.

Heinrich probably wanted to prevent a situation where his friends would have to be hostile when they learned that the situation was rapidly changing.

And he likely wanted to represent my position as well.

Heinrich did what he did because he didn't want me to have to kill my classmates.

We shouldn't fight amongst ourselves.

But Louise would be flustered when her son directly informed her of what he had done.

Did he really get slapped by his mother…?

"The important thing right now isn't that."

Heinrich's actions were problematic in their own way, but as Charlotte had said, it was something that would be revealed eventually.

What Charlotte and I were worried about was not the fact that Heinrich had caused an accident.

I had received a message.

Since Louise had never met me in person, she had to go through Rowan to deliver a message to me.

In other words, her son had leaked the secret to his friends, and he went to his mother to ask if she could deliver this message to the Demon King. That was what he said.

And the person who needed to deliver the message was none other than the Holy Knight Commander Rowan, whom Louise personally despised.

The fact that I received this message meant that Louise had swallowed her pride and humiliation, asking Rowan to deliver the message.

"If he were my son, he would have really been slapped."

"…"

Charlotte seemed to agree with my words, nodding her head.

Heinrich…

You were lucky to be alive as a son…

You should have known what you were asking your mother…

So the message went from Heinrich to Louise.

From Louise to Rowan.

And from Rowan to me.

Heinrich's actions might have been a blunder, but the message had tremendous significance for me.

According to Heinrich's confession, it seemed Kono Lint had decided to side with me.

This was huge.

From Louise's perspective, her foolish son had caused an accident without any discretion, but for me, it was fortunate.

Kono Lint's decision to side with me greatly expanded the scope of the accident.

There were many more things I could do.

Erich and Cayer seemed to be contemplating.

And finally, Cliffman.

He had delivered a message to us.

It was not a politically significant message, nor one that would have a significant impact on the overall situation.

"It's not a problem for us to decide, is it?"

"Yeah, that's true."

But the judgment of the message was not something either Charlotte or I could make.

And whether it influenced the overall situation or not, it was by no means a light message.

I want to meet Liana.

That was the message Cliffman had sent.

CHAPTER 651

The message sent by Cliffman was, to be precise, a request or perhaps a demand.

He wanted to meet Liana.

From the beginning, it wasn't a matter for me or Charlotte to decide.

Of course, we could have told her to meet him, but we didn't want to do that.

Did Cliffman have the right to say he wanted to see Liana?

It wasn't as if Cliffman would be on our side if we let him meet her.

Even if he did join our side, would Cliffman's power hold any great significance for us at this point?

Cliffman had undoubtedly grown stronger and significantly improved his skills.

However, in a situation where Master-class and Archmages were prevalent, Cliffman's power would have little significance.

He could not be a variable like Kono Lint.

Such things could be considered.

But we decided not to take those factors into account.

We didn't even want to think about them.

Relationship issues were important.

Maybe they were the most important thing in the world.

That was what I believed.

The world had come to this point because of those damned relationships and

emotional issues.

If I hadn't been the Demon King Valier.

If Ellen hadn't been Ragan Artorius's younger sister.

If Charlotte hadn't been the emperor's daughter.

Becoming close without properly resolving those issues was the root cause of all problems.

We should not treat such issues lightly.

Therefore, in the end, this was not a matter for me to decide.

It was up to her to decide.

"Me…?"

Liana wore an indescribable expression upon hearing Cliffman's message.

Her dilated pupils told just how surprised she was.

During the Temple days, Cliffman had been a timid fellow.

No, even that was an understatement.

He didn't know how to handle women or men, and it took months after countless encounters in the training arena for them to exchange their first words.

Moreover, when girls like Ellen or Harriet spoke to him, he would stutter and sink into silence.

In other words, he had a day's worth of social skills, and his capacity was as small as a soy sauce dish.

He would often become dazed while interacting with someone and collapse.

On the other hand, Liana had no problem with strangers.

Although she seemed quite irritable on the surface, she was actually quite easygoing and didn't take things to heart.

She was always proactive, and it was always Liana who suggested going somewhere to have fun after becoming friends with the others.

Someone who discriminated against everyone.

Someone who discriminated against no one.

Although they were opposites, I believed that people with completely different personalities got along better than those with similar ones.

In fact, Liana had always been dragging the passive Cliffman around since some point in time.

Although I was the one who decided to let Cliffman participate in the Mister Temple contest, Liana was the one who supported him the most.

Eventually, the two became close.

When Duke Grantz died, they pledged to avenge me together.

But on the day the Gate incident occurred, Liana appeared to save me without saying a word to Cliffman.

She hadn't told him the real cause of her father's death or her decision to rescue me.

Could that be called a betrayal?

Although the events of the Temple days had taken place a few years ago, they felt like something that had happened decades ago.

Everyone had changed.

Both Liana and Cliffman had changed.

Cliffman, who had always been passive and struggled with dealing with people,

requested to meet Liana.

And then.

Liana, who had always been active, bold, and acted as if she didn't know the word 'shyness.'

"…"

Liana's face turned pale, and she trembled.

Was Liana's behavior a betrayal or not?

Liana wouldn't have wanted to take Cliffman on the dangerous path.

At that time, I really had no significant power. Following me and trying to save me, who was imprisoned by the Empire, was insane.

The only one who had decided to act with Liana that day was Harriet.

Liana didn't even know that the Vampire Lords were trying to save me.

It was a life-threatening, crazy act, and Liana must have expected death that day.

So, she couldn't tell Cliffman about it.

She couldn't take Cliffman with her on a practically suicidal mission.

But even if it wasn't a betrayal, there could be a feeling of betrayal. I don't know how Cliffman felt about Liana's actions.

Of course, Liana wouldn't know either.

Cliffman only said he wanted to meet Liana, not how he felt about her.

I also don't know what Cliffman thinks about me.

Like Christina or Ludwig, he might have wanted to question my responsibility.

We've been through too much to imagine it would be like our time in the temple.

Neither Liana nor I could know what purpose and with what feelings Cliffman wanted to meet.

So, Liana's face turned pale and she trembled.

She didn't know what to expect. After all, she could be attacked.

Because so much had changed, Liana wasn't the old Liana, and Cliffman wasn't the old Cliffman.

It was only natural to be afraid.

Not because the meeting was dangerous.

Seeing and hearing firsthand how things had changed, the moment of confirming it, could be terrifying.

Charlotte and I couldn't judge this message.

At the very least, we had to inform Liana.

"You don't have to meet him if you don't want to."

"…"

All things considered, it was better not to meet.

Whether Cliffman sided with us or not, it didn't matter in the grand scheme of things.

But Liana was one of the most important people on our side.

There was even a slight possibility that Cliffman could harm Liana. So, it was better not to meet.

The potential gain was minimal, while the potential loss was enormous.

With a simple calculation, this meeting wasn't even worth considering.

However, I could make a calculation, but I had no intention of involving the result in the decision.

There was only one important thing.

Did Liana want to meet or not?

Liana could make such calculations without me even telling her.

If she didn't want to meet, she didn't have to. Whatever the reason.

The decision was up to Liana.

Just as the outcome and reality of this world were not the results of a cost-benefit analysis.

In the end, what's important is not the gains and losses.

Liana was terrified.

It was strange.

During the temple days, Liana was undoubtedly a superhuman with enormous potential. But her power at that time wasn't that strong.

However, Liana had always been brimming with confidence and self-assurance.

What about the Liana now?

It wasn't an exaggeration to call her the most powerful Supernatural in the entire world.

Now, Liana's power had reached a level that not only Supernaturals, but even the most powerful mages couldn't rival.

As Liana grew incomparably stronger, her personality, ironically, became the opposite.

She easily became depressed, struggled, and suffered.

She had changed to be more passive.

Upon hearing Cliffman's desire to meet her, she was paralyzed with fear, not knowing what to expect.

As Liana became stronger, she also became weaker.

Liana spoke.

“…Yeah."

"Uh."

Liana's eyes were trembling.

"I'm, I'm too scared…”

She hadn't even met him yet.

She didn't know what Cliffman was thinking.

But Liana's eyes were filled with hot, red tears.

"I'm so scared… I feel like I might die…”

There was only one reason for such an intense reaction.

It was because Liana cherished Cliffman.

She was afraid that someone so precious to her would treat her differently than before.

That fear was so overwhelming.

It was so terrifying that she couldn't help but say she felt like dying.

Yes.

It was a similar context to how much I hated and feared facing the changed Ellen.

Liana bowed her head and trembled for a long time.

She had shown vulnerability many times before.

But this was the first time she had ever appeared this weak.

"Still… I have to meet him, don't I?"

She thought that as Liana de Grantz, a human being, regardless of her position as the Thunder King, she couldn't refuse.

"You don't have to meet him if you don't want to."

Was it absolutely necessary to meet?

I wasn't sure.

Instead, after meeting, there's a chance she might be hurt physically or emotionally, but she might not get hurt as well.

"Let's think about it later."

"Later?"

"Yeah. I don't know what will happen, but let's consider it for later."

The future was uncertain.

But now, she was in a situation where she could make a decision about meeting Cliffman.

Later.

"If you decide not to meet now, do you think you'll regret it later? Or do you think you won't?"

She didn't know whether she would have another chance to meet Cliffman later.

But if, at this moment, she said she wouldn't meet him.

If she delivered such an answer to Cliffman or completely ignored him.

What would happen?

What would Cliffman think, and would Liana regret it later or not?

Setting aside whether she should or shouldn't meet, she thought only about regret.

Would she regret not meeting him, or would she not?

"I'm scared to death right now… But…”

Liana raised her head.

"If I decide not to meet him now…”

Tears finally fell from her flushed eyes.

"I feel like I'll live with this feeling for the rest of my life…”

She didn't know whether this situation was an opportunity or a crisis.

However.

If she didn't meet him, she felt like she would regret it for the rest of her life.

That's what Liana seemed to think.

Were there things that one must face, even if they were frightening and scary?

Couldn't they run away, avoid it, or pretend not to know?

But there were such things in the world.

Things that would definitely be regretted later.

However, if one avoided something out of fear, they would inevitably regret it later.

Thus, there were things that were frightening and scary, but had to be done to avoid regret later on.

For Liana de Grantz, this was that very task.

"I can go with you," Reinhardt had said.

Liana shook her head. "No… I think it's better to meet alone."

She didn't want to give any hint of preparation for a possible confrontation, so Liana chose to face it alone. Although she would need someone's help to come and go, they should be alone in the moment they faced each other.

Even if it couldn't atone for the time when she had left without a word, it was, at the very least, a matter of courtesy. Liana thought as much.

There was no reason to accept Cliffman's request in the first place.

The messenger Heinrich who relayed the message to Louise.

Louise, who had heard the absurd request.

Rowan, who had passed on the message.

Charlotte and Reinhardt as well.

Liana was no exception.

And finally, Cliffman himself, who had made the request.

None of them could have imagined it would come to this.

However, through each person's judgment, the message was passed on and, by Liana's own decision, the meeting was arranged.

The world had changed, the era had transformed, and people were different.

Although they used to be close enough to meet by simply knocking on the door of a dormitory hallway, now countless people had to be involved to convey even the simplest of messages.

Just to see each other once, so many people were involved.

Merely passing on a single word had become much more difficult.

A meeting that had been arranged in such a way took place deep in a forest, beyond a field strewn with the corpses of defeated monsters.

Had the time that had passed been long?

However, due to the characteristics of the era when one could only feel the passing of more time than had actually elapsed, psychologically, it felt as if decades had passed.

Cliffman could have the meeting he desired at a certain tree stump in that place.

"…"

There was the face Cliffman had wanted to see.

Always confident, sometimes even overbearing.

The person who used to firmly grasp Cliffman's arm and drag him around, confidently swinging the young boy around as she told him to trust and follow only her.

Now she stood with her hands together, her eyes downcast.

As if she didn't even deserve to make eye contact.

As if she had committed a great sin, making it impossible to look the other person in the eye.

“…Hello."

Her voice was barely audible, struggling to get the words out.

And so,

"It's been… a while…”

Cliffman was able to see Liana de Grantz, who had shrunk to a size she could not

possibly become any smaller.

CHAPTER 652

There were times in life when one's heart seemed to pound so fiercely that it might burst.

It could be due to extreme shock, fear, excitement, or overwhelming emotion.

At that moment, Liana was experiencing such a heart-pounding sensation.

It was because of fear.

But it wasn't just fear.

These heart-pounding moments could be caused by a mixture of emotions.

As overwhelming as the fear was, Liana's heart felt like it would burst.

There were moments when the sound of one's own heartbeat seemed audible not just within the chest, but also to one's own ears.

It was that overwhelming.

But, unable to guess what words would come from those lips, Liana could not look him in the eye, her gaze lowered in front of her friend whom she had not seen in so long.

There had been a moment when they had vowed to kill the Demon King together.

That thought had been deeply appreciated.

But the two who made that resolution were too young back then.

They were too small to consider the great name of the Demon King as their enemy.

There had been a time when it seemed laughable that they, as well as their friend, could even consider seeking revenge.

But at some point, the days when that name weighed heavily had passed.

The determination for revenge lost its direction, and Liana, who had intended to kill the Demon King, had become his most loyal servant.

One of the Demon King's most important minions.

To be precise.

She had become one of those who should only be called the Four Heavenly Kings.

It would take days and nights to explain all that had happened in the meantime.

But in the end, conversation could only begin if they wanted to exchange words.

Despite Liana's hesitant and strained greeting, Clifman only stared at her silently, saying nothing.

Even in the past, Clifman had not been particularly talkative.

Whether or not he was dealing with Liana, Clifman was always a listener, giving short answers when prompted to speak, or rambling when he had more to say.

He had been terribly inarticulate.

Just like then, he was silent now, but Liana couldn't help but notice that it was different from the past.

The Clifman of the past had been short on words because he couldn't find anything to say.

But now, he wasn't unable to find something to say, he was simply choosing his words.

It wasn't that he didn't know what to say.

He was just considering where to begin.

Time had passed.

People change.

Just as Liana had changed, Clifman had naturally changed as well.

"You really came to see someone like me."

The boy who had once been timid had become a cynical man.

You really came to see someone like me.

There was so much meaning in that single sentence that Liana felt dizzy.

In those few words, all of Clifman's thoughts, self-loathing, and disillusionment up until now were contained.

"What… are you saying…? Someone like you…?"

Liana looked at Clifman with trembling eyes.

"I'm weak, aren't I?"

"…"

"That's why you left me behind, right?"

"!"

That was a harsh statement.

It wasn't an insult to Liana, but a self-deprecating remark.

"I was only able to activate Magic Body Strengthening back then. Someone like me would have been useless if you had taken me with you. It was only natural for you to leave me behind."

Unable to bear Clifman's self-deprecating words, Liana had no choice but to interrupt him.

"No, that's not it…"

"Then what?"

"…Huh?"

"Was there another reason?"

Cliffman inquired.

Liana could only bite her lip with a sorrowful expression.

"…If you had come with me, you would have gotten hurt. No, you would have died. I didn't want you to get hurt because of me."

"So you're saying, even if I had gone with you, I would only have been hurt or killed, and my presence would have been of no help to you."

"…"

Essentially, he was saying that she knew that he would be useless and meaningless by her side.

Would the situation have been any different if Cliffman had been there?

Probably not.

He would have only been a burden.

She didn't want him to get hurt, so she didn't take him with her.

She didn't take him with her because the chances of him being a negative factor were high.

In truth, both statements were the same.

Only the way they were expressed was different.

Liana had spoken in the former way, and Cliffman had understood it in the latter way.

And the truth remained that the latter interpretation was true.

But wasn't that too harsh a way to put it?

Wasn't the sentiment more important?

It hurt that her actions, born out of concern for him, were interpreted as being dismissive.

Liana's intentions didn't matter.

He was discarded because he was useless.

He was too weak to go with her.

That was how Cliffman took it.

And ever since the Gate incident, Cliffman had continued to think that way.

"Liana, I'm not saying that I'm bitter or that you shouldn't have done it. You had to do it. And it was the right thing to do. I wouldn't have been any help. I'm sure of it."

"…"

"I don't think much has changed even now."

Cliffman, who once couldn't even choose his words properly, was now able to coldly organize and express his thoughts.

But the direction of all his words was still sad.

It wasn't resentment towards Liana.

It was disillusionment with his weak past self.

A self-assessment bordering on self-hatred.

Cliffman was just stating facts.

He listed the facts without any sign of resentment towards Liana.

All the resentment and disillusionment were directed towards himself.

If he had been strong enough to be of help, Liana would have sought his assistance.

Resentment for his weak past self.

Disillusionment with his weak past self.

Cliffman had continued to feel what the armless Ludwig had felt.

And that was why Cliffman couldn't leave Ludwig alone.

Liana was definitely afraid.

Afraid that Cliffman would pour curses on her, resent her, or blame her in his feelings of betrayal.

She was afraid, thinking that way.

But now, Liana faced an unexpected scene.

Cliffman didn't blame anyone.

Not Liana.

Not the Demon King.

No one.

"Thank you, once again."

"…"

"For coming to see someone like me."

He just resented himself.

Liana was more afraid of this side of Cliffman.

Seeing the broken Cliffman, Liana gritted her teeth and trembled.

"It's my fault. I… I'm sorry…”

As Liana finally burst into tears, Cliffman still gazed at her with a hardened expression.

"It's not your fault, Liana."

"It is. It's all my fault. I…”

"You didn't do anything wrong."

He didn't blame the person who should have been blamed.

Liana couldn't help but know that it was the hardest thing to bear.

Cliffman was not angry, nor did he feel betrayed.

He seemed to accept it as a matter of course.

He hadn't been taken along because he wouldn't have been of any help.

In that case, it was his fault for not being helpful.

It was simply because he was weak.

And even now, he still thought he was weak.

That was all he thought.

Cliffman waited quietly in front of Liana until her tears stopped.

With the same expression as before, Cliffman just stared at Liana.

"Are you calmed down now? Shall we talk?"

"…”

He didn't blame her, but he wasn't affectionate either.

He didn't hug the crying person or pat her back.

He wasn't that kind of person to begin with, but now it seemed he didn't even want to try.

Hearing him say that she wasn't at fault only intensified her guilt.

Liana found Cliffman unfamiliar.

He had become a completely different person, in a different way than she had imagined.

After Liana stopped crying, Cliffman asked her various questions.

Since he genuinely didn't blame her, Cliffman conversed with Liana rather calmly.

In the end, the one who had done wrong was the only one who was restless.

Liana had no choice but to watch Cliffman's reactions throughout, and Cliffman asked what he wanted to ask.

"Your father's death… It wasn't because of the Demon King, right?"

“…Yes."

"So, it was the Empire after all?"

"…”

"I see."

When Liana vanished without a word with the Demon King, Cliffman had no choice but to grasp what had happened to some extent.

If Liana, who had known the Demon King as her enemy, suddenly saved him and disappeared, there would be no other reason.

"Actually, I thought I was going to die that day. It was reckless. I moved with Harriet, but even she was prepared for that. But I didn't want to involve you."

The overlapping situations allowed Reinhardt to escape the temple, and Liana had intended to fight a losing battle.

It was a place where death was certain.

That's why she couldn't take Cliffman with her.

But in the end, it was true that she had conspired with Harriet but hadn't taken Cliffman.

Harriet could be helpful.

Cliffman couldn't.

Wasn't that the truth?

"I understand."

Liana clenched her teeth at the resignation in his tone.

"No… you don't understand at all…"

"I understand well enough that I was useless…"

"I hated the idea of you dying because of me more than I hated the idea of me dying!"

"…"

In the end.

Liana's expression twisted miserably.

Cliffman stared at Liana in silence as she raised her voice.

"It wasn't because you were useless, or because you were weak…"

Tears welled up in Liana's eyes again.

"It was because you were precious to me…"

At Liana's miserable confession, Cliffman's eyes widened.

"You were important to me. I wanted you, at least, not to die… That's why I did it… It wasn't like that. It wasn't that kind of meaning. I'm sorry. I'm sorry for doing that. I was wrong. I know I was wrong. It's just… I was wrong, and it's true that I left you behind. It's true, but…"

"…"

"Please, it wasn't because you were meaningless, or useless, or unhelpful, or weak… It wasn't like that… Please believe me. I'm telling the truth."

She had left him behind.

But the reason she had left…

In the end, it was a story about him.

Liana's words, as she tearfully spoke of her emotions to a Cliffman who was now accepting her feelings differently, were closer to a plea than a confession.

"Just… just hit my cheek. Curse at me. Ask why I left you behind. Call me a traitor… That would be better…"

She was terrified of being scolded, her breath caught in her throat as if she were about to die.

However, seeing Cliffman's state, Liana thought it would be better if he hated her instead.

It was better for someone to find the cause of their problems in others.

If one only sought the cause of their problems within themselves, they would become ill.

Those who lived believing that everything was someone else's fault could at least continue to live.

Those who lived believing that everything was their fault would rot from the inside out.

Liana found it more painful to see Cliffman wallowing in self-pity than to bear his anger.

It wouldn't matter if it were anyone else living that way.

But Cliffman wasn't just anyone to Liana.

Seeing Liana crying, Cliffman stared blankly at the sky.

In the forest.

Sunlight streamed through the leaves.

"I cherished you too."

"…"

"But I couldn't be of any help to someone precious."

"…"

"I didn't want to think you were bad. There must have been a reason for everything, a reason for not speaking, a reason for not taking me with you, a reason for the gate incident. I thought there must be a reason for it all."

Cliffman spoke of thoughts he'd had for a long time.

"I didn't want to resent you."

Out of countless choices, there was just one.

Cliffman did not want to choose resentment towards Liana.

"To not resent you, there was no other way."

Because Liana was precious, he tried to think that all her actions were justified.

Why she didn't take him with her, why she didn't say anything.

To do so, he had to find the cause within himself.

If only he had been stronger.

If only he had been more useful.

If he had been reliable enough for Liana to seek help and tell him everything.

That would have been enough.

To believe that Liana had done nothing wrong.

To not resent Liana, he had no other path but self-hatred.

Watching Cliffman make such a wretched confession, Liana tried to hold back her tears.

"Really…"

With red-rimmed eyes, Liana looked up at Cliffman.

"You're still such a fool…"

He could have simply resented Liana.

It would have been an easier path to think she had gone mad and followed the Demon King, and resent her for not saying anything.

But if not a fool, what was he, choosing to resent himself in order to understand her?

Liana grasped Cliffman's hand.

Liana held on tightly, her grip nearly crushing, but Cliffman felt the strength in her grasp was pitiful.

A powerful supernatural, but her physical strength was still lacking.

They had changed.

Both Liana and Cliffman had changed.

But there were things that remained unchanged.

After countless incidents, the fact that they still cherished each other had not changed.

"Being a fool has its good points."

"What are they…?"

“I knew I am still useless and weak, but… even if it was utter nonsense, I did the foolish thing of saying I wanted to see you…”

Cliffman squeezed the hand of Liana, who was holding his own.

"Like this, I got to see you again."

There was no reason for Liana to come see Cliffman.

He knew that too.

But he said it anyway, knowing that it made no sense.

That he wanted to see Liana.

Logically, he knew it was impossible. There was no reason for Liana to come see him.

Yet, he said it just in case.

It was foolish, but there was a slim chance.

In the end, the other party responded to his strange request.

And so, they got to see each other again.

Ultimately, they realized that even though they were both broken, they didn't blame each other.

One was blaming themselves, and the other felt sorry. They both knew that.

Foolish acts don't always lead to bad outcomes.

"Really… truly…”

At Cliffman's words, Liana's lips trembled slightly.

"You… as you've grown older… truly…”

Tears welled up in Liana's eyes again.

"You've become sentimental…”

Saying it made her want to throw up.

Her body shook as if she couldn't bear it.

But in the end, Liana laughed.

A laugh of pure joy.

It was her first laugh in three years.

"…”

"…”

My eyes met with the blockhead's.

"It… turned out well, right?"

"It went so well that I feel nauseous."

"Uh… yeah, it's a bit… like that…”

Cliffman.

That guy had become incredibly sentimental.

He hadn't been like that when I watched him as a cat.

No, maybe it was because Liana was in front of him that he was acting like that.

We didn't mean to eavesdrop in the first place.

Well, it was eavesdropping, but Harriet and I were watching from a distance just in case something went wrong.

In case Cliffman did something unexpected, we needed to stop him.

But seeing Liana's tearful appearance and Cliffman's excessive chatter…

Since we had been listening to their conversation through magic, both the blockhead and I felt quite nauseous.

"Anyway, it's fortunate… really fortunate."

Yes, as the blockhead said, it was truly fortunate.

What's the big deal if he's become sentimental? It's a great relief that nothing went wrong.

At first, I thought the situation was going awry, but in the end, Cliffman had those thoughts because Liana was precious to him.

So, he was grateful to Liana, who had come to see him after hearing that he wanted to see her.

Although it was sad for Liana to know that Cliffman wasn't blaming her but blaming himself, she couldn't help but be moved.

In the end, Cliffman confirmed that he valued Liana even more than she thought.

It was impossible to know what he was thinking when we watched him as a cat because he was so quiet.

But eventually, he spoke his true feelings in front of Liana.

"Actually, I was a bit nervous…"

Harriet's face turned red as she watched Liana, who was now comfortably chatting even with tear stains on her face, and the two who had started a somewhat normal conversation.

Nervous?

“…Do you like that sort of thing?"

"…?"

Do you like sentimental stuff?

"Why, do you want me to do it?"

At my words, the blockhead's brow furrowed.

I had never tried something like that before, but there wasn't anything I couldn't do if asked.

"Don't do it, seriously."

As my expression began to suggest some mischief, Harriet glared at me with narrowed eyes.

But then again.

It was a bit difficult to deliver a cheesy line without any buildup.

What should I say?

"Meeting you was the greatest fortune of my life."

That was the only thing I could think of!

However, Harriet tilted her head, not entirely satisfied with my unexpected statement.

"That's true, isn't it?"

"???"

"Am I wrong?"

No, that wasn't it.

I didn't know how to respond since it came out so abruptly.

"Ah, no… I mean, you're right, but…"

"Hmm…"

Well, I couldn't deny it was the greatest fortune…

But wouldn't it be a bit… strange for you to admit that with your own mouth?

Harriet approached me and crossed her arms.

Then, looking up at me, she grinned broadly.

"Isn't our adorable baby cat happy to have an owner like me?"

No.

No!

Excuse me!

Why are you better at this than I am!

"I… I was wrong…"

"Why are you acting up, then?"

Cheesy and embarrassing.

My heart almost stopped.

CHAPTER 653

The tense atmosphere between Liana and Cliffman had eased somewhat.

It was enough that they still cherished each other.

"Your ability… it's that powerful?"

"Yes."

"I heard there was some strange weather last winter… Was that really?"

"Yeah, it was me."

Cliffman couldn't help but be taken aback when Liana revealed that she could now not only summon lightning but also cause weather anomalies.

That's why, knowing that the weather anomalies that had occurred thus far were Liana's doing, he could only nod blankly.

"That's amazing…"

"Still, I can't use it just any way I want. It's a bit peculiar."

"Peculiar how?"

"Well…"

Liana sat down on a rocky ledge and sighed deeply.

"I guess I should say… the worse I feel, the stronger the effect."

"Hmm…?"

"I think my power reacts to my emotions. Weather anomalies, for example… seem to react to negative emotions."

A power that responded to dark, negative emotions.

Initially, it hadn't awakened through positive experiences.

As long as she couldn't control her emotions at will, there were bound to be limitations if those were the activation conditions.

"It's a strong ability, but… it doesn't seem easy to use."

At Cliffman's words, Liana lowered her head.

"It's not exactly like that. I can use it whenever I want."

“…But you said you have to feel bad to use it?"

"There's a way."

Liana pulled out a potion from her belongings.

From Cliffman's perspective, it was just a bottle containing an unknown drug. Liana gave a bitter smile.

"If I take just one of these, I'll become so depressed that I'd want to hang myself right away."

"A depression-inducing drug…?"

"That's right."

"And you take that?"

"There are no side effects. It's safe. And so what if there are some side effects? If I can kill hundreds of thousands of monsters in exchange for feeling a bit down, I should do it."

It wasn't a matter of life or death, just a significant decline in her mood.

At that point, Cliffman could only nod blankly, thinking it was a no-brainer. Some people couldn't even kill a single monster despite risking their lives, so if the price was just that, they should do it.

However, Cliffman noticed that Liana, as she spoke, had a trembling hand holding the crystal potion.

Undoubtedly, Liana was afraid of the drug in her hand.

She would know best the horrible feelings she would experience when she drank it.

It wasn't without cost, but she mentioned hundreds of thousands.

Cliffman felt dizzy at the scale.

Even if he combined all the monsters he had killed so far, would he even reach ten thousand?

But Liana made it possible with just one use of her ability. Though Cliffman had become stronger compared to the past, Liana was on a completely different level.

With just one battle, Liana could annihilate tens of times more monsters than Cliffman had killed throughout his life.

As Cliffman's expression hardened, Liana took his hand.

"Why are you making such a face…? Don't look like that."

"No, it's not that. You and I just have different things we can do. I was just thinking about it for a moment."

"Right…"

Cliffman knew that everyone had different abilities.

While Liana possessed an excessively powerful ability, the fact that Cliffman had killed over a thousand monsters up to this point was already an incredible feat.

It was just a matter of comparing with the wrong person.

Could there be a Supernatural more powerful than Liana?

The moment Liana had gained the ability to summon lightning, Cliffman couldn't help but recall that memory.

In front of her father's coffin, Liana had screamed and awakened her ability.

Although he didn't know much about Supernaturals, Cliffman clearly remembered the moment Liana had awakened to her new Supernatural power after a shocking experience.

And now, she possessed an even greater power.

Had she naturally gained such power?

Or…

"Liana."

"Yeah?"

"Did something… happen?"

Her father's death.

Had she awakened another power through another, similarly significant event?

From Liana's sudden change in complexion at his question, Cliffman could tell that something had indeed happened.

After a brief silence.

"I committed a sin."

"…"

"A sin so great, it couldn't be undone."

It was difficult for Cliffman to understand that it was not a sad event, but something she had brought upon herself.

Liana briefly explained.

She had killed people, not monsters.

Countless people.

She didn't elaborate any further.

"Why… did you do that?"

There was no way Liana would do such a thing without reason, so Cliffman had to ask.

"There was a reason. Definitely."

"…"

With a stern expression, Liana gazed at the wild grasses growing beneath the bare ground in the forest.

"But I realized too late that there are things that shouldn't be done, even if there's a reason."

She had thought it was something that absolutely had to be done, but in the end, it was something that shouldn't have been done.

As a result of doing what shouldn't have been done, someone else was paying the price.

"So now, I don't think about revenge anymore."

Having become someone for whom talking about revenge was laughable, she said that revenge no longer crossed her mind.

Liana had merely stated that.

Liana had returned.

No matter how long they talked, their reunion would always feel too short.

Cliffman had left, and Liana was waiting for us at the location we had agreed upon.

"How was it? Did you talk well?"

"Weren't you hiding and listening to everything anyway?"

At Liana's words, Harriet and I couldn't help but flinch.

“…How did you know?"

"You wouldn't do that, would you?"

Me.

Was I unexpectedly an obvious person?

No, thinking that I wasn't obvious might have been a bit absurd.

Liana's expression had lightened. Cliffman's probably had as well.

If that was the case, Cliffman might later be able to support us, but that wasn't the reason Liana had met with Cliffman.

There were things to be resolved before the final battle, apart from political meaning.

"Do you feel relieved?"

"A little?"

Liana smiled and nodded at my question.

There was still much to be done.

"Let's go back; there's no point in staying around here any longer."

Harriet started casting after she finished speaking.

Liana had certainly been afraid.

Cliffman might have changed.

Certainly, Cliffman had changed, but not in the way that Liana feared.

I had certainly taken on a different appearance, but I checked on how everyone was doing.

However, I couldn't tell what their reactions would be when they actually faced me.

Just as Cliffman didn't resent Liana, there might be people who don't really resent me. Scarlett was one such case.

Like Christina, who didn't show it on the surface, they could be harboring hatred within.

Cliffman wasn't someone Liana absolutely had to meet.

But Liana, who faced Cliffman, seemed considerably more at ease.

I too wished to meet someone in that manner.

There wasn't much time left.

There was just one person I wanted to meet so badly.

Besides Ellen, there was only one person.

The day before the march, Adriana found herself in a barracks she had never visited before.

She wasn't scared, but she couldn't help feeling tense in an unfamiliar situation.

The owner of the barracks was sitting on a desk, not a chair, with her arms folded, silently watching Adriana.

She had a youthful face.

Her actual age was unknown, but she looked like someone who couldn't be more than six years older than her.

She had a consistently smiling face, giving a good impression wherever she went. But this was Adriana's first time dealing with her, and somehow she couldn't help but

feel a sense of unease from her smiling face.

Although she was smiling, her smile seemed too plastered on her face.

Despite the other person smiling, Adriana felt strangely that she didn't look like she was smiling at all.

There was Adriana, a Holy Knight.

And there was the highest commander of the Holy Knights, the Holy Knight Commander, Rowan, right in front of her.

Suddenly, indeed.

Adriana had received a summons from the Holy Knight Commander.

As a Holy Knight who moved with the Temple Army rather than the Holy Knight Order, Adriana was not under their direct control, even though she was technically a member of their order.

Thus, she rarely had any reason to see the newly appointed Holy Knight Commander, which made her feel both puzzled and tense when she was summoned.

The sudden replacement of the former Holy Knight Commander, Eleion Bolton, was strange news even for Adriana, who did not move with the Holy Knight Order.

The exact circumstances of what had happened still hadn't been made clear.

Even Adriana couldn't make sense of the situation, so the confusion within the Holy Knight Order must have been even worse. And that confusion was still ongoing.

There were rumors about Rowan's background being quite unusual amid the controversy and suspicion.

There were whispers of his involvement in the darker aspects of the Holy Order.

Rumors of being an inquisitor of heretics or a member of an assassination squad.

Someone who shouldn't have come out into the open had done so.

Was that even allowed?

Adriana felt the weight of the circulating rumors filled with suspicion.

And now, the new Holy Knight Commander, Rowan, shrouded in suspicion, had summoned Adriana.

She was someone who had never seen her before and had no reason to be interested in her.

Adriana was not even a high-ranking Holy Knight.

While her skills were beyond reproach and she already possessed abilities equal to or greater than those of a high-ranking Holy Knight, she had no actual position or obligations.

And so, the summons from the Holy Knight Commander felt strange to Adriana.

Moreover.

Having called her and made her stand before her, she didn't sit on a chair but rather on a desk, staring intently at her.

She was a smiling woman, but somehow, it was uncomfortable.

Rudely, she couldn't help but think her gaze was unpleasant.

"Commander, did I do something wrong…?"

Eventually, Adriana couldn't help but cautiously speak up first.

At Adriana's words, Rowan tilted her head.

“…No?"

"Then, is there something I need to do…?"

"Hmm…”

Rowan remained silent in response to Adriana's question.

She was an inscrutable woman.

People can usually guess the mood of others from their expressions and reactions to some extent.

However, Holy Knight Commander Rowan, who was right in front of her, was not someone from whom she could feel any such thing.

She was smiling, but she didn't seem to be in a good mood, and she couldn't tell what she was thinking.

As if she had received some sort of special 'training.'

When conversing with someone whose intentions and emotions were indiscernible, people tend to feel discomfort.

However, if that person also held greater power and authority than oneself.

Especially if they held the power over life and death, it was only natural to feel fear instead of discomfort.

Adriana couldn't help but feel that Rowan was accustomed to such situations.

Someone who was accustomed to instilling fear in others just through their attitude.

Naturally, Adriana couldn't help but sense that one of the floating rumors had a high likelihood of being true.

Even though the Holy Knight Commander used polite language with Adriana, a low-ranking subordinate, she couldn't tell if she was being respectful or not.

How much time had passed?

Just as Adriana was thinking that she had become stiff as a board,

"Adriana, your career seems quite impressive."

"…?"

She couldn't help but be more puzzled by the unexpected words.

An impressive career.

Did she have anything that could be described as such?

"Isn't being a Temple Royal Class graduate itself an impressive career?"

"Ah…"

It was that story. Adriana cautiously nodded her head.

The Temple, which gathers talents from all over the continent.

Only those with exceptional abilities were granted admission to the Royal Class. Neither status nor power matters. Only talent determines admission to the Royal Class.

That's why being a Royal Class graduate alone could be considered an impressive career.

"Other people might not know, but I… I'm not so sure."

Adriana wasn't being humble when she said that.

Indeed, powerful Supernaturals and mages definitely possessed the firepower that suited their background and talent.

Comparing herself to those with such formidable talents, Adriana thought she was rather shabby.

"Why? Are only mages and Supernaturals considered talented? Your record in monster extermination is quite extensive, even compared to high-ranking Holy Knights and priests of the Holy Knight Order."

"…Is that so."

She couldn't remember how many times she had been on monster extermination missions. Not only with the allied forces but also during the ongoing Gate crisis, she had continuously gone out to exterminate monsters.

Thus, unbeknownst to her, she had amassed a career worthy of the Holy Knight

Commander's attention.

Rowan began reading the document laid beside her on the desk.

"Originating from the Artoon Monastery in Saint Owan, the Duchy of Saint Owan… Birthplace unclear… Received education at the monastery, displayed talent, and entered the Royal Class at the Temple…"

It seemed to be a document containing Adriana's background. Adriana watched as Rowan quietly read through it.

"Left the Temple around the second year… Joined the battle after the outbreak of the Gate incident, returned to the Order… Afterward, enlisted in the Temple Army and served until now…"

As expected, the document contained not only her withdrawal from the Temple but also her return to the Temple and enlistment in the army after the Gate incident.

Rowan didn't read further, which was likely all about her combat experiences. In the end, what was the purpose of having her background prepared and what was she going to say?

Rowan stood up from his desk and approached Adriana.

"Our backgrounds are similar."

"…?"

"I also come from a monastery. An orphan left there."

At those unexpected words, Adriana couldn't help but be taken aback.

Both Rowan and Adriana were children abandoned at a monastery.

Their ages seemed similar, although Rowan seemed slightly older.

"Our talents also seem to have been similar."

With Rowan's words, Adriana became increasingly confused.

Both were orphans from a monastery, of similar age, and even had comparable talents.

But she was the Commander of the Holy Knights, and she was merely a Holy Knight in the Temple Army.

Was she taunting her about their differences?

Adriana didn't understand why the Commander would make such pointless jabs at her.

Rowan brought her hand to Adriana's cheek.

Adriana felt a chill from Rowan's touch on her cheek.

It wasn't due to her discomfort.

The touch was genuinely eerie.

Contrary to her innocent and clean appearance, Rowan's dry palm was excessively rough and firm.

Adriana's hand was similar, but the touch of that dry hand undoubtedly expressed some hardships Rowan had experienced in her life.

The Commander of the Holy Knights looked at an ordinary Holy Knight and said,

"What difference is there between you and me that…"

It wasn't disdain or mockery.

"I am like this, and you are like that…"

In her tone, there was unmistakable jealousy and envy.

Adriana couldn't comprehend the emotions she sensed from Rowan. Why had the Commander of the Holy Knights summoned her, and what did her incomprehensible words mean?

"There is someone who wants to meet you."

The Commander of the Holy Knights simply said that.

In the end, the Commander of the Holy Knights only spoke cryptically.

She just informed her that someone wanted to meet her and provided a location and designated time.

The time was set for night.

It was an inexplicable command, but she couldn't refuse it.

Therefore, Adriana headed alone to the southern region of the garrison, a place where no one ventured.

Why had the Commander of the Holy Knights given such an order?

Someone wanted to see her.

Could someone make such a request to the Commander of the Holy Knights just to meet a Holy Knight of Adriana's rank, who wasn't even a high-ranking Holy Knight?

Who could that person be?

Why would such a person want to see her?

Amidst the uncertainty, Adriana left the garrison and continued walking south.

A meadow far from the battlefield, with no traces of combat.

In the moonlight, Adriana soon saw someone sitting in the grass.

"Ah…"

She still couldn't understand what was going on.

She didn't even know how it had come to this.

However, Adriana couldn't help but have some suspicions.

What was happening?

Why had the Commander of the Holy Knights given such an order?

What had happened to the Holy Knights?

She couldn't know everything, but she couldn't help but guess what was happening and what had happened.

And why would anyone want to see someone as insignificant as her?

The person who had been sitting quietly stood up when he saw Adriana.

It wasn't a face she could describe as one from her dreams.

It wasn't a face she had been longing to see.

Their relationship wasn't like that.

They weren't that close.

But undeniably,

still,

deep in her heart,

there was someone she cherished, standing right in front of her.

"Rein… hardt…?"

"It's been a while."

Under the moonlight, her ill-tempered junior smiled sadly, as he always had.

"Senior."

And he called her by the same title as before.

Spellbound, Adriana knew she couldn't understand everything, but she knew one

undeniable truth.

"You're safe…!"

As if enchanted, she rushed forward and tightly embraced her terribly ill-natured junior.

"Well, who am I?"

Just like before,

her wicked junior spoke arrogantly.

CHAPTER 654

In truth, it was a very shocking and complicated moment.

However, when Adriana saw Reinhardt, all other concerns and situations flew out of her mind, leaving it completely blank.

All other thoughts had vanished.

So, she couldn't help but rush to Reinhardt and embrace him.

She had heard that he was safe somewhere, and she knew that he had appeared in the Imperial Palace.

She knew he was safe.

But when she saw his face, she couldn't help but embrace him, overwhelmed by a sense of relief that pushed everything else aside.

And then.

Gradually, thoughts began to fill her once-blank mind.

She had hugged him too tightly.

And Reinhardt, in turn, hugged Adriana tightly as well.

It was a joyful reunion, but.

"…"

"…"

Gradually, it became awkward.

The embrace had been so intense that it felt as if they were siblings separated by war, making the situation even more uncomfortable.

Had they ever been this close…?

It was inevitable to wonder.

Although she had hugged him impulsively out of joy, they didn't know when to let go, so they hesitated until Adriana carefully released her arms first.

"Ah… um…”

"Yes… well…”

Their faces turned red as they stepped back and stammered awkwardly.

Adriana couldn't help but laugh at the absurdity of the situation, even though she found it somewhat ridiculous herself.

For some reason, a surge of emotion welled up from deep within her chest.

He had been an annoying junior who often made irritating noises.

But still, the expression she saw most often on him was this one.

When he couldn't run properly, when he knew nothing about fighting.

That was the expression he always wore back then.

"You haven't changed, junior."

At those words, Reinhardt gritted his teeth.

It was as if he was trying to suppress a surge of emotions.

Although she knew he was the Demon King, to Adriana, Reinhardt was still the clumsy junior who knew nothing but was full of confidence.

And yet.

Later, he had risked his life to save her. It was only much later that she found out that it had been Reinhardt who had done so.

Even later, he had become the protagonist of terrifying events.

He was now synonymous with terrifying events, and seeing that he had summoned her through the Holy Knight Commander, Adriana knew that something she couldn't understand was happening.

She still didn't know what had happened or how things had come to this point.

But Adriana couldn't help but know.

Junior.

With just that one word.

What exactly he felt with that one word.

As his eyes reddened and he tried to suppress something from bursting out.

That the person before her was not the Demon King, but Reinhardt of the Temple, the real person she had always wanted.

She couldn't help but know that.

Otherwise, that one word wouldn't have turned his gaze so nostalgic.

At first, Adriana had been so surprised and overjoyed that she had hugged Reinhardt fiercely.

This time, she carefully embraced his head.

"Junior, you've had a hard time."

"…"

The second embrace was filled with different emotions than the first.

Not joy, but worry and comfort.

Adriana was a more special existence to the Demon King than she could have ever imagined.

It was a time when there were secrets, but no power to conceal them.

In those days, he was truly weak and knew nothing; his only defining feature was his foul temperament.

Before anyone else in the world, before Ellen Artorius, was Adriana.

She had seen the frail side of the Demon King and was the first to guide him.

Without hesitation, she took the hand of a person who was utterly detestable, with a bad temperament and an even worse first impression.

That's why, more than she could imagine, the Demon King couldn't help but see Adriana as someone special.

To the Demon King, Adriana was the only one.

"Yes," the Demon King spoke, wrapped in Adriana's embrace.

Adriana was the only person in the world who could see his vulnerable side.

"It was hard," he admitted.

At his honest answer, Adriana held back tears and embraced her junior, who was stronger than anyone else but, in truth, also more fragile, even more tightly.

Their reunion wasn't tearful, but it almost was.

In a moonlit field, Reinhardt and Adriana sat side by side.

Although the awkwardness between them had somewhat subsided, Reinhardt hesitated.

"Uhm… There's so much to say that I can't seem to say anything."

"Actually, I feel the same way," Adriana confessed.

Like Reinhardt, she didn't know where to start because of the many things they had

experienced.

Both the Demon King and Adriana had gone through more than a few trials.

But among all of their stories, there was not a single one they could share with laughter.

"In the end, there was so much I didn't know. I didn't even try to learn."

She had become someone who moved according to the orders of the Demon King, through the Commander of the Holy Knights.

There were countless things that could be imagined from that alone. Adriana couldn't help but know the significance of the sudden fall of Eleion Bolton.

"So, Lord Bolton…"

"He's alive."

"Ah, that's… good."

Adriana sighed in relief.

Just as Adriana didn't know much about Rowan, she knew little about Eleion Bolton.

Nevertheless, Adriana couldn't help but think it was fortunate that someone was still alive.

Watching Adriana sigh in relief, Reinhardt grinned bitterly.

"But all five popes are dead."

"…What?"

"I didn't kill them, but I ordered their deaths."

"I see…"

Adriana lowered her head, her expression complicated.

The death of the popes was a significant event. If such news had become public, Adriana would have known.

The confusion caused by the change in the Holy Knights' commander was still ongoing, but somehow the popes' deaths remained hidden.

Of course, this meant that the upper echelons of the religious order were all puppets moving according to Reinhardt's commands, and their influence was so great that they could even cover up the deaths of the popes.

Adriana had expected Reinhardt to go through various trials, but she never thought he would have to decide someone's death.

All of these tragedies were unwanted by both of them, Adriana knew. But in the end, deciding who lived and who died in these unwanted circumstances was inevitable.

That's why Adriana couldn't help but be sad.

To Adriana, who considered it fortunate that Eleion Bolton was alive, Reinhardt confessed that he had ordered the deaths of others.

It must have been a warning not to harbor any illusions.

Adriana did not ask for the reason.

For speaking of it and hearing it would be a painful affair.

And naturally, when confronted like this, there was someone who could not help but come to mind.

Irene's wild dog.

That's what she had been called.

They hadn't known each other for long.

But entangled with the Holy Knights and the Five Great Religions, Adriana became a hostage and was later rescued.

With nowhere to go, Reinhardt entrusted Adriana to the Rotary Club.

And Adriana could not help but become very close to Loyar.

But that Loyar was actually Lycantrop.

Lycantrop, who had urged Adriana to flee at that time.

In the end, Loyar, who died saving Reinhardt, and the people of the Rotary Club, could not help but come to mind.

They all died.

Loyar thought she was keeping her secret well, but most of the club members already knew that Loyar was Lycantrop. Of course, the club members must have implicitly known that Reinhardt was not an ordinary person.

If any of them had carelessly opened their mouths, neither Loyar nor Reinhardt would have been safe.

Neither Reinhardt nor Loyal knew that they were keeping the secret, not until they all died.

Loyar's name, too.

And the people of the Rotary Club.

Neither Adriana nor Reinhardt mentioned each other.

But the long silence itself made it impossible for them not to know what the other was thinking.

Neither of them brought up the sad stories, on purpose.

Now was the time to think about the future.

"Can everything be alright?"

It wouldn't be.

Adriana could not help but realize that something else would come after the Gate incident.

The Demon King and the Empire.

Something was already happening between them.

"As it always has been, it might not be," Reinhardt did not offer a positive outlook.

"Still, I'm trying to do as much as I can."

“…Right."

Adriana looked at Reinhardt.

The junior, who had always been far inferior to her, was now in a position of incomprehensible strength and unreachable status.

"Junior, am I stronger than before?"

At Adriana's seemingly playful remark, Reinhardt smiled.

"I suppose so."

"I don't use a sword anymore, but a hammer?"

To kill monsters, she now wielded a massive hammer instead of a sword.

A giant hammer that ordinary people could barely lift.

With it, she had not sliced but crushed countless monsters.

Reinhardt nodded at her words.

"I know."

“…Huh? How do you know?"

"I, I was watching…”

Reinhardt, who had been hesitating to say something, finally gave up and sighed deeply.

"The cat. Do you remember?"

“…Cat?"

At the unexpected remark, Adriana tilted her head.

In this place, mentioning a cat out of the blue could only mean one thing.

Adriana's eyes widened with a sudden intuition.

"Oh, no way."

"That was me."

"…”

At the shocking revelation, Adriana could only stand there with her mouth agape.

The black kitten that had suddenly appeared.

Disappearing and reappearing, staying for a while and then vanishing again.

Eventually, the black cat was taken away by Ellen to the temple.

"To be honest, it wasn't exactly like a dog… Well, fine, I admit it. It was a bit perverted. I know that. I know, but…”

"Somehow."

Adriana interrupted Reinhardt's attempt at an explanation.

Reinhardt quietly stared at Adriana.

Despite the bizarre story, Adriana was laughing.

Smiling, she pinched Reinhardt's cheek.

"Somehow, that cat really liked both Ellen and me."

Strangely enough, the kitten was particularly fond of Ellen and Adriana.

The kitten would sit on Adriana's lap and eat jerky, and it wouldn't resist when Ellen took it to her room.

That was definitely the case.

If the cat was Reinhardt, it made sense that it behaved that way.

That fact revealed a lot.

The cat's behavior showed that Reinhardt hadn't changed from before.

He still liked Ellen and cared about her, which was why he visited her in that form.

And not just in front of Ellen, but also in front of Adriana, the cat was well-behaved and tried to stick close.

"Junior, you must have really missed not only Ellen, but also me, huh?"

"…"

At Adriana's teasing words, Reinhardt, or rather, the Demon King who was now in an almost unreachable position, blushed.

Embarrassed that his true feelings had been discovered, he seemed unsure of what to do.

In the end, even now, it was because he wanted to talk to Adriana that he had summoned her like this.

"You're so cute."

"What do you want me to do about it…"

Watching her junior blush, Adriana laughed for the first time in a while.

And then, she was surprised at herself for laughing.

She couldn't remember the last time she had laughed like this.

The realization that there had been days when she could laugh like this made her

inevitably calm down again.

"So, is there no particular reason?"

"Reason?"

"Yeah, if there's something you want to talk about, it should come out by now. But it doesn't look like there is."

They had embraced passionately, worried about saying something they shouldn't, and had a little conversation.

So if there was something to say, it should have come out by now, but Reinhardt hadn't said anything about his purpose.

"In a way, the reason was that there was no reason."

"Huh?"

Reinhardt looked at Adriana.

"Since the Gate incident, there has been a reason for everything I've done."

"…"

"So, it means that none of it was done because I wanted to."

It was because something was needed.

Because he had to become stronger.

Because he had to form an alliance.

Because he needed information.

Because he wanted someone's power.

To prevent some disaster.

To prevent someone's death.

Or, to kill someone.

All of them were reasonable actions.

Rather than reasons, to be more precise, they were necessary actions.

Things that the Demon King had to do.

He had been acting to achieve certain goals that he had to accomplish in order to achieve his desired objective.

Even matters related to Ellen were necessary, as observing the hero's situation would help predict future events.

But.

There was no need for him to meet Adriana.

"Before everything ends, I just wanted to do something for the sake of doing it. Something that wasn't necessary or had no reason, but I just wanted to do it."

"…"

Adriana faintly smiled at his words.

He had simply wanted to see her after a long time.

The Demon King had sought out Adriana just for that.

"Was that the reason you came to see me?"

"…Is it strange?"

"No, it's not strange. In fact, I'm grateful."

Adriana suddenly stretched her arms towards the sky, yawning.

"But it does make me feel a bit miserable, knowing that I'm not someone of any real use."

“…That's not what I meant."

"But it's true. I don't have much influence, and whether I'm on your side or not doesn't really matter, so meeting me would be a waste of time from your perspective. I know I'm weaker than you now. Do you think I'm stupid?"

"…”

Ultimately, Adriana was not someone directly involved in the grand scheme of things.

Although she was much stronger than ordinary people, she was still infinitely weaker compared to those who made the big decisions.

She had no power or authority.

That's why the Demon King had no need to make time to seek out Adriana.

While keeping an eye on other more important figures had its own significance, Adriana was not one of them.

Adriana was someone he didn't need to use.

"Still, thank you for putting it nicely, my junior. Saying that you wanted to see me for personal reasons. That makes me happy."

"…”

In the end, it's all about perspective.

It could be considered a waste of time.

But it could also be said that he had left important matters behind to see someone he truly wanted to see.

Adriana couldn't help but be happy that she was the only person he sought out for personal reasons.

Reinhardt quietly looked at Adriana.

"To be honest, I was scared."

“…Scared? Of what?"

Just as Adriana thought Reinhardt hadn't changed much from before.

The Demon King couldn't help but think that Adriana treated him the same way as before, based on her attitude.

"I was scared that you might have changed."

“…Ah."

"Everyone has changed, you know."

That's why he hadn't faced Adriana until now, because her attitude and perspective might have been different from before.

Someone had drastically changed, and it would be strange if they didn't change at all.

Since he was the only one reminiscing and remembering the past, meeting Adriana again could lead her to curse the Demon King who had created the world as it was now.

The Demon King said he was afraid of that.

Not death or anything else, but the fear that Adriana might look at him with a twisted face and curse him.

"It's just that you were scared of."

"…”

"It's just that… and you're still scared…”

Adriana, as if feeling pity, bowed her head and shed tears.

The Demon King didn't cry.

He just talked about his fear with a stern expression, saying he was scared of just that.

As if trying to throw away any weak appearance today.

He talked about the fear he had never told anyone before.

"I didn't have any particular purpose."

"Right."

"But, when I came here and saw you in person, one emerged."

"Purpose…?"

Reinhardt looked at Adriana as they spoke, wondering what had come to mind when he said he had come without a specific purpose.

"Escape from here."

“…Huh?"

"Stop fighting."

Adriana's eyes widened at the unexpected remark.

"Return to the Imperial Capital, or follow me. I'll take care of everything else, and so will the others."

Now, there was only one battle left in the Gate incident.

Thus, the purpose of urging her not to fight the last battle emerged when the Demon King faced Adriana.

"My junior."

Adriana's expression hardened.

"Are you telling me to be a coward?"

"Yes."

He didn't beat around the bush, insisting it wasn't about cowardice or offering other

reasons.

It's because she could survive the final battle or die.

Run away in cowardice and live.

The Demon King had no intention of using Adriana, but he said such words because he wanted her to survive.

"My junior, the power I have may be weak. I may be weaker than you, infinitely weaker compared to other strong people, and it might not mean much."

"…"

"But that doesn't mean my desire to do something is insignificant."

The desire to save someone.

The desire to help, even a little bit.

The size of one's power doesn't determine the size of their heart.

At Adriana's words, the Demon King bit his lip.

Everyone had their own determination.

To try to break that because of his own desires was arrogance.

If Adriana wanted to fight, did he have to forcibly remove her from the battlefield because it was dangerous?

"Still, I can do more than my fair share."

"…"

Reinhardt could no longer pressure Adriana.

It was already selfish enough to ask someone to step aside out of fear for their death.

He couldn't force someone to leave if they didn't want to.

However, as if he couldn't stand it,

Adriana could clearly see the expression that showed he wanted to do so, even by force.

"Promise me."

“…What?"

"Promise me you'll survive."

In front of her junior, who said those words with a sad expression,

"Who am I, then?"

Adriana smiled and threw back the same words her junior would often say when he acted like a fool.

CHAPTER 655

In truth, it wasn't necessary for Liana to meet Cliffman.

Whether Cliffman sided with us or not, it wouldn't make much of a difference.

However, Liana had met Cliffman.

Seeing that, I thought the same.

At least once, I did.

After all, up until now, I had always pursued a purposeful goal.

Perhaps it wouldn't hurt for me to meet someone I just wanted to see, even if it were only once.

As Liana had been afraid, I too was scared.

I feared that Adriana might unleash her anger towards me.

But like Cliffman, Adriana didn't resent me.

I wanted to take Adriana off the battlefield inappropriately, but she refused. I knew she would refuse.

In fact, if someone shouldn't fight for such a reason, there shouldn't be a single soldier in the allied forces. There wouldn't be anyone who absolutely had to fight.

So it was only natural that Adriana rejected the words I selfishly uttered.

I wished for survival.

For Adriana, for myself, and for anyone else.

A promise of survival wouldn't guarantee one's life.

Regardless of such a promise, someone would eventually die.

Because that's what war and battles were about.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

After returning to Lazak, I nodded in response to Harriet's question.

"Your expression has worsened."

Had it?

With a worried look, Harriet touched my cheek and scanned my face.

Liana seemed somewhat relieved.

After meeting Adriana, my heart felt even heavier. There was no quarrel, and Adriana was even worried about me.

I should feel better, but my mood sank further.

Still, I didn't regret meeting Adriana.

"I just want to do better."

"…?"

"That's why I'm like this."

At the end of a brief break, I resolved to do better.

I might not be able to protect everyone.

But isn't it right to want to protect everyone?

"Christina, what's wrong with you?"

"…"

To Louis Ancton's question, Christina remained silent with a rigid expression, seated in front of the desk.

It was Christina's sole decision to try to use Ellen as a hostage.

Louis Ancton, Anna, and Ludwig had no idea that Christina would attempt such a thing.

Therefore, to the others, Christina appeared suddenly pale and speechless.

Christina couldn't speak of her involvement in the matter.

"What's going on?"

"No, it's nothing."

"It doesn't seem like it's nothing. Why have you been like this for the past few days? You should eat something."

Ellen Artorius.

To overthrow the Demon King, Ellen had to be used.

Christina was confident in that idea.

That's why she believed it was just a matter of execution.

She didn't think it would be easy to suppress Ellen.

That's why she led the elite Immortals and waited for a moment when they wouldn't be watched.

However, instead of subduing Ellen in a place without watchful eyes, the Immortals were brutally slaughtered.

And after overpowering Christina, Ellen hesitated for a moment before she put Christina down and walked away.

Christina hadn't even managed to put up the slightest resistance.

It was true that the Immortals had suffered because Ellen was strong.

However, it wasn't Ellen's strength that rendered Christina unable to resist.

Christina felt in her bones that she had underestimated the nature of combat.

Even a fellow battle mage was unnecessary.

There was no need for Magic Body Strengthening.

Simply fighting against a robust soldier would have been enough for Christina to realize how weak she was, vulnerable to death.

Creating an Immortal didn't make Christina herself stronger.

She had been under the illusion that wielding great power made her powerful.

But there were more important things than regretting her miserable arrogance.

For several days after that day, the moment when Ellen was choking her haunted her dreams, but even that wasn't the most important thing.

'It's not human… That's not a human.'

She had discovered something very strange while trying to take Ellen hostage.

Ellen's voice.

A bizarre voice that could never belong to a human.

A pain unlike anything she had ever felt before, as if tens of thousands of people were speaking simultaneously, tearing her soul apart just by listening.

Ellen wasn't simply a formidable opponent.

It wasn't something that could be described to that extent.

Ellen had become something other than human.

Dangerous, terrifying, and horrifying at the same time.

Something that seemed to possess its own will.

'It's dangerous… This, this is dangerous.'

Originally, Christina intended to capture Ellen to kill the Demon King and lure him out.

However, she had made the mistake of stepping forward and provoking Ellen while intoxicated by her own arrogance.

But now, that mistake seemed almost fortunate.

The most dangerous thing wasn't the Demon King, the Empire, the Immortals, or even the Gate Incident.

The sword that cut through anything.

The cloak that blocked any attack.

Ellen Artorius, who wielded those two relics, had been swallowed up by something strange.

Christina had paid the price for her arrogance and error.

And she learned a crucial fact as a result.

The most dangerous existence now was none other than Ellen Artorius.

Having suffered such a humiliating defeat, Christina wouldn't step forward again.

She didn't plan to become a battle mage, unfamiliar as she was with fighting.

As she had been doing, she would simply command from behind, using the Immortals in a manner befitting her status.

Christina believed she had already addressed the threat of Scarlett.

But what about the other threat?

How should she deal with Ellen, who could cut down the Immortals like a scythe through wheat?

Was there anyone in the world who could face Ellen?

What had Ellen Artorius become?

What did she want?

But one thing was clear.

Ellen, who had become something unknown, had definitely said this.

She wouldn't kill Christina yet because she still had a use for her.

Ellen could break through the barrage and attack of the Immortals' army.

She was the only one who could actually do that.

It meant she would kill Christina, regardless of what happened to the Immortals, once everything was over.

Ellen represented neither the Empire nor the Demon King.

Thus, Ellen was the only one who could try to annihilate the Immortals without regard for the world's interests and kill Christina without hesitation.

Only then did Christina truly understand the strength of Ellen Artorius, which she had only heard of before.

People naturally assumed that the hero was on their side.

And so, they simply praised the hero's strength.

But they couldn't imagine what would happen if Ellen Artorious, the hero, became their enemy.

However, Christina had seen it with her own eyes.

If the hero became an enemy, nobody could stop her.

She had seen that no army, sword, or magic could stand against her.

Ellen was better when she still had some semblance of humanity.

Ellen Artorious, who was crumbling under the weight of guilt, could still communicate as a human. That's why it was possible to make her retreat by touching upon that guilt.

But now, there was no dialogue to be had.

Suppose the hero had become a monster-like existence. What should be done then?

Humankind had developed weapons to end the Gate incident.

They were neither Titans nor Immortals.

The strongest weapon of humankind had always been in human hands since the Gate incident.

Ellen Artorious was that ultimate weapon.

But now, only the aspect of a weapon remained in her.

Although the hero without humanity was still on the side of humankind, she was not on Christina's side.

From the beginning, she was not a being that could be treated like bait.

It was unclear whether Ellen would be a threat to humanity, but she was definitely a threat to Christina.

'I have to kill Ellen.'

The unknown itself was the biggest threat.

If Ellen was not eliminated, everything might be ruined.

Christina began to become consumed by this thought.

"Christina, what's wrong? There's obviously something going on. Don't worry by

yourself, talk to me."

But it was clear that no one would agree to the idea that Ellen had to be killed.

So Christina couldn't bring herself to voice that thought.

The allied forces had now begun their advance towards their final target, Diane.

Would the Gate incident end, or would humankind end?

Under normal circumstances, the military's combat power should weaken as they advance. However, strangely enough, the allied forces' combat power was exponentially increasing as they fought.

Firstly, it was because of the Titan's involvement, and secondly, it was after the Immortals joined.

As the Gate incident became more dangerous, the allied forces grew stronger.

Everyone knew the identity of the Titan.

It was a gigantic golem created under the leadership of the brilliant mage of the Archduke of Saint Owan and the Temple.

However, nobody knew what the second power was, even though they had all seen it.

It might have been fortunate that the horrifying military force was part of the allied forces, but ultimately, everyone was bound to feel fear as long as they didn't know what it was.

But the truth couldn't be kept secret forever by those who knew it.

Inevitably, stories began to spread throughout the allied forces, starting from an unknown source.

The mysterious and powerful army was said to be an undead legion created by the empire, using the corpses of fallen soldiers.

That's why all the soldiers wore helmets with face-covering visors or robes that covered their faces.

It was said that they covered themselves so thoroughly because someone might recognize the face beneath the helmet or robe.

Rumors spread that the emperor had turned to forbidden power to end the war.

The truth, which was too hard to believe, spread like a groundless rumor.

The rumors didn't end there.

Whispers spread that there were traitors within the allied forces, individuals who had sworn loyalty to the Demon King.

The Emperor had intervened that week.

Those who pledged loyalty to the Demon King were emerging from the allied forces.

Heading towards their final battle, the allied forces were shaken by two bizarre rumors that threatened to disrupt their unity.

And lastly,

Another piece of news spread through those who had no choice but to travel to the Imperial Capital for supplies and other reasons.

In the Imperial Capital, a preposterous rumor circulated that the gate crisis wasn't the doing of the Demon King, but rather the Emperor himself.

That's nonsense.

What would the Emperor be lacking to do such a thing?

Naturally, there were very few who believed the rumor.

There were many starving people on the Imperial Capital, so they have no one to blame but His Majesty.

Yes, there was a huge disaster last time, and many people died, right? It must be

because of that.

Whenever something went wrong, people assumed it was their fault.

The majority didn't believe the rumors.

However, rumors have a way of growing and becoming entwined.

The first rumor.

An army made of the dead.

The second rumor.

Those who swore loyalty to the Demon King.

The third rumor.

The bizarre notion that the Emperor was the mastermind behind the gate crisis.

There were those who didn't believe the rumors, but there were also those who were susceptible to them.

And those who were weak to rumors often combined them.

But… if it was true that the Emperor caused the gate crisis… then what exactly is the Demon King?

Don't say such crazy things. It's a dangerous claim.

No… it's strange… don't you think it's weird that the Demon King hasn't attacked us so far?

The Demon King's inaction in attacking humanity thus far had already become a foundation for speculation.

The assumptions people had never made before were now becoming solidified within the unbelievable and bizarre rumors.

Think about it. If the Demon King really wanted to eradicate humans, he could have

done it already. He just needs to target a different place instead of here. So why doesn't he?

Ordinary thinking would have deemed it impossible that humanity was still alive.

But no one had ever thought of it that way, and even if they had, they hadn't voiced it.

However, once the name was mentioned, it became unstoppable.

Conversations about the Demon King circulated throughout the allied forces.

Could it be that the Demon King doesn't really care about destroying humanity?

That's nonsense! Didn't the Demon King attack the Imperial Capital last time? During… the princess's execution ceremony. It was said that he turned the Imperial Capital into a wasteland then.

No, from what I heard, he just took the princess and disappeared. There were very few casualties.

I heard thousands of people burned to death.

Are there any witnesses from the Imperial Capital?

In the end, rumors gave birth to speculation, and conjecture disguised as truth became yet another rumor that haunted the allied forces.

Eventually, everyone couldn't help but arrive at the greatest suspicion.

Why was the Demon King leaving humanity alone?

It was an undisputed fact that the Demon King had caused the gate crisis to eradicate humanity.

But why were there no further actions taken?

Though the Demon King had seemingly vanished, there was a clear record of his appearance not too long ago at the execution of the princess.

There were those who had witnessed the battle themselves.

Whether it was the Imperial Army or another force, the Demon King had appeared at that time, mercilessly slaughtering the Swordmaster and the Archmages. In the end, the hero who emerged struck the Demon King's heart, and he disappeared.

Did the Demon King actually die then…?

There's no way he died just like that…

Rumors began to circulate, suggesting that the Demon King had actually died at that moment.

Had the Demon King already died long ago?

If the Demon King had died, what about the traitors who now claim to have sided with him?

Right?

Rumors spread, and it was impossible to tell where the truth ended and the lies began, plunging people into confusion.

That's why rumor-mongers were created.

It was only natural for people to gather scattered stories and create their own version of the truth.

The Demon King never intended to annihilate humanity; the fact that he hadn't attacked humans so far was evidence of that.

The Gate incident was a conspiracy or accident orchestrated by the emperor, who then pinned the blame on the Demon King.

Upon discovering the truth, some of the alliance's leaders, who learned that the true culprit was the emperor, began to side with the Demon King.

Feeling threatened, the emperor started to secretly remove the corpses of fallen warriors and created an army of the undead to protect the empire and himself.

This story had no real connection to the facts, and the cause-and-effect relationship was arbitrary.

There was no explanation for what the emperor would gain from causing the Gate incident, nor why he would organize the alliance to end the Gate incident if he was responsible for it.

Even the background of the Immortals and the emergence of the Demon King's supporters had a reversed cause-and-effect relationship.

In the end, fabricated stories that were more believable gained credibility.

At any rate, stories that began with the assumption that the Demon King was evil garnered people's trust.

Now, stories that began with the assumption that the emperor was evil started to gain credibility.

Some stories were easier to believe when there was someone who had clearly done something wrong.

Naturally, there were many who dismissed these stories as nonsense.

The important thing was that confusion began to spread among the people regarding what to believe.

When rumors became too exaggerated, even though only a few people believed in the overly inflated rumors, some small parts of the rumors could not help but be treated as the truth.

Those who believed in the fabricated truths were few.

However, people began to believe in the sources of those rumors as the truth.

The emperor had created an army of the dead.

The Demon King was interfering with the alliance.

There were leaders within the alliance who had sided with the Demon King.

Since the Gate incident, the Demon King had not attacked humanity even once.

These four truths became deeply ingrained in people's minds.

The exaggerated and baseless rumors made people recognize the foundations of those rumors as facts, regardless of whether they trusted the rumors themselves.

Really, did the Demon King cause the Gate incident?

If the Demon King didn't cause the Gate incident, it made sense that he hadn't attacked humanity thus far.

On the contrary, if the Demon King was indeed responsible for the Gate incident, it became incomprehensible why he had allowed humanity to continue existing until now.

In reality, there were no stories of the Demon King personally slaughtering people or destroying human cities, aside from the Gate Incident.

And so.

The Allied Forces advanced toward Diane in confusion.

With an inherent chaos of not knowing who to hate.

Thus, the path to the final battlefield.

"There's no need to do more. It’s already reached the maximum charge."

Redina spoke as she looked at Cayer Voiden, who was sitting in the Ark Crystal Chamber.

"I know."

Redina's role was to extract and use the magical power from the Ark Crystal, which stored Cayer's magic.

However, since Redina found out that Cayer's physical condition had become extremely weak after the continuous battles, she hadn't been pressing him about the Ark Crystal-related issues.

It was then that Redina realized.

From the beginning, Cayer had been doing what he was supposed to do, whether

Redina asked him or not.

Therefore, even when Redina didn't push or rush him, Cayer continued to do his part, ignoring her pleas to stop.

"I told you not to come in here when there's no need to charge. Sitting there will only drain your magic."

When magic was depleted to an extreme degree, a person dies.

It was the depletion of the source of life.

By now, Redina knew better than Cayer himself how weakened his body had become.

But as the battles continued, their already strained relationship completely fell apart.

With only this task available to him, he questioned what else he could do.

As Redina's harsh words chipped away at Cayer, he had no choice but to obsess over the only task he could do.

Even when Redina apologized and begged in regret, Cayer wouldn't listen.

"That's not what I'm trying to do."

"Then what are you doing?"

What could he do in front of the already fully charged Ark Crystal?

Redina, who had warned him not to leave the chamber, now felt the most uneasy, knowing what kind of effect that action would have on Cayer's body.

"I have a magic manipulation deficiency, but I can put magic into the Ark Crystal. So, I was trying to see if I could control the speed of magic infusion."

"…"

The only thing he could do.

Cayer seemed to be trying to see if there was something else he could do.

I ruined him.

With wide eyes, Redina could only watch Cayer's actions.

"But it doesn't work. The Ark Crystal doesn't receive the magic from me; it takes my magic."

It wasn't transferred by his will but was taken by the Ark Crystal.

In the end, Cayer got up from the chamber with a bitter smile, admitting he didn't know.

"Adelia must be amazing for creating something like this."

An incredible talent said to be born with immense magical power.

However, the inability to wield that magic.

Seeing Cayer, who had nothing but made himself useful thanks to his gifted classmates, Redina bit her lip.

Cayer's self-deprecating words were all things Redina had once said.

That aside from having a lot of magical power, he was a useless, foolish child.

She would snap at him to charge the Ark Crystal instead of fooling around whenever their eyes met.

The sight of those who couldn't be saved due to a lack of magic during battles.

Because of the sight of people dying, not just one or two, but in the hundreds.

She couldn't help but think it was all because of a single person's negligence.

Until now, she had hurt Cayer.

Cayer didn't deny the wounds he received.

Now, he even said the words Redina had said with his own mouth.

I am useless.

This is all I can do.

Now, he says those words to himself instead.

Looking at Cayer like that, Redina lowered her gaze.

"Can we talk for a moment?"

Always giving orders and scolding was now a thing of the past.

Redina tried her best to treat Cayer with utmost respect.

Ironically, Cayer himself didn't care about things like tone.

CHAPTER 656

"Don't recharge the Arc Crystal?"

Upon hearing Redina's words, Cayer furrowed his brow.

"Yeah, we can just use it as it is for the battle in Diane."

Once the battle in Diane was over, the gate crisis would come to an end. Redina's suggestion was to leave the crystal as it was and use the Arc Crystal just once more.

"We don't need to use it continuously during the battle."

As Cayer pointed out, they had been using the Arc Crystal during battle by having Cayer recharge it and Redina draw out its magical power.

"But you collapsed last time."

"…"

Cayer's condition was terrible.

Regardless of the fact that there was only one more battle left, there was no guarantee that Cayer would be safe if they used the Arc Crystal in the same manner.

The Arc Crystal was currently fully charged.

Redina suggested using the crystal without recharging it for the final battle and to have Cayer stay out of the fight.

Redina nodded, looking at Cayer's stern expression.

"I understand what you want to say. With you, I'd be able to use more magic. That would definitely be helpful."

"…"

"But you know it too. There's that… strange army."

At her words, Cayer's eyes widened.

Now Cayer knew what that army was.

"People say it's some kind of… undead legion made of fallen warriors. I don't know how much of that is true. But, anyway, it seems that our importance isn't as great as before due to that army. So, I think using the existing Arc Crystal should be enough."

There was no need to use magical power extracted by sacrificing lifespan.

That was what Redina was saying.

Cayer knew about the Immortals.

Certainly, Redina wasn't wrong.

As long as the Immortals existed, the importance and necessity of Redina unleashing magic from the Arc Crystal were less than before.

Soon, the need for Cayer to bear a huge burden would be lower.

But was it alright to proceed like this?

Before Cayer could say anything.

-Thud

Redina knelt before him.

"Please."

Redina looked up at Cayer as she knelt.

"Don't push yourself any further."

"…"

"Until now, I've… been too much for you. I've wronged you. I didn't know anything. I

only thought about myself. I acted selfishly."

Cayer silently watched his younger senior pleading on her knees.

"I don't know what to do. I want to apologize, but I don't know how. I don't know what a proper apology is. I'm sorry…"

As Redina began to sob, Cayer Voiden forced a bitter smile.

It wasn't just Cayer who had been broken.

Redina, who had to decide the death of countless people with her own hands, couldn't remain unscathed either.

But even though she was broken.

She apologized while looking at what she had destroyed.

Not knowing what to do, she hung her head, trembling.

Cayer had coldly told her there was no need to apologize.

To just keep doing what she had been doing.

But now, someone else could take their place.

If that was the case, there was no need to continue acting coldly.

Persisting that they could still do more because they hadn't died yet would be a rather despicable behavior, wouldn't it?

Risking one's life in a situation where it was not necessary was not for the purpose of ending the Gate incident, nor was it out of a desire to save people.

Even here, telling them to just do what they had been doing, like before, was merely petty vengeance.

It was like coercing a miserable wretch who had always been oppressed and belittled by them, saying, "You made me like this, now try to save people with the power you created by sacrificing my life."

Regardless of right and wrong, it was simply a mean act.

It was only meant to torment Redina.

And so,

Cayer knelt down before Redina, who was apologizing.

"I really wanted to see you regret it for the rest of your life after I died."

"Please… Please…"

"What a pity."

Although his words were filled with malice, in the end, he was saying that he would do as Redina had suggested.

There was no reason to obsess over something meaningless.

Risking one's life in a situation where death was avoidable was simply a foolish act.

"…Sob, sob!"

Cayer carefully patted Redina's shoulder as she finally burst into tears.

"I'm sorry… It's my fault. I… I went too far until now."

"Don't cry. It's just unfortunate."

Cayer gently comforted his unfortunate and impudent senior.

Reconciliation might be difficult, but once it was done, it felt like nothing special.

In the end, it was the Immortal that brought about the reconciliation between Redina and Cayer.

Since the appearance of the Immortal, Redina had felt that her existence, as a user of the Arc Crystal, was no longer as important as before.

Cayer had no choice but to realize that being obsessed with charging the Arc Crystal while feeling an unwarranted sense of responsibility was meaningless.

Of course, in the end, it was Redina who tried to persuade Cayer, acting as a mediator for their reconciliation.

Only those who have experienced reconciliation can understand.

Before reconciling, it feels like the hardest thing in the world, but what's truly important comes afterward.

"…"

"…"

An awkward silence, so tense that it caused cold sweat to run down their bodies.

If they had been very close to each other originally, it might have been possible to reconcile and return to how things were before, but these two didn't have such a past worth mentioning.

The Arc Crystal was a giant power cartridge.

Originally, the project related to the Arc Crystal was not thought of by Cayer or Redina, but by Adelia.

A person with immense magical power but unable to use it.

A person capable of near-superhuman speed in magic casting but with extremely low magical power.

Adelia, who knew of their existence, created the Arc Crystal.

Thus, although Redina and Cayer were senior and junior, they were initially acquainted through work.

Their relationship wasn't even about being on good or bad terms; they had simply met through work.

So, there was no returning to how things were before.

At first, they tried to cheer each other up, but that was only for a brief moment, and their relationship only accumulated dissatisfaction.

Since they had never been close and had only grievances against each other before reconciling, their relationship became even more awkward than when they had only been expressing their complaints.

"…"

"…"

Redina fidgeted with her fingers, and Cayer was no different.

"It's… a little… awkward… right?"

Redina's words, forced out with difficulty, were merely that.

"…Yeah."

That was all Cayer could think of.

At times like this, a new topic was needed.

The advancing army had halted near the Arc Crystal Tower.

Redina gazed up at the summer night sky, which seemed to be showered with stars.

"By the way, there have been a lot of strange rumors lately."

"Ah… that."

"It seems like all sorts of stories are emerging now that the war is coming to an end."

Redina dismissed all the ominous rumors circulating among the allied forces as baseless.

People were just excitedly spouting various stories, she thought.

Indeed, many of the stories were hard to believe.

As Redina spoke, Cayer said softly,

"Most of those are probably true."

“…What?"

"I said, most of them are probably true."

Redina, looking flustered, heard Cayer's words.

"What… do you mean? What rumors are true?"

In response to Redina's question, Cayer stared intently at her astonished face.

"The ones about the empire using dark magic to create an army of undead from fallen soldiers."

"And that there are people who have sided with the Demon King."

"That the emperor is involved in the Gate incident."

"All of them, probably true."

At Cayer's words, Redina's eyes widened.

"Just because the war ends doesn't mean everything will be over. Something else will start."

Cayer gazed intently at Redina.

"Even if I don't know, you're an important person. So, you should know too."

The truth was not important.

One had to decide which truth and facts to choose and follow.

In her tent, Redina sat blankly.

It was long past bedtime, but sleep eluded her.

Most of the baseless rumors were true.

An army of undead.

Traitors to humanity.

The emperor's involvement in the Gate incident.

If the Demon King was to be hated or not, Redina had never thought about it.

She couldn't equate the Demon King in her head with the one known to the world.

However, she couldn't completely separate them either.

She couldn't tell which side was the real Demon King.

There were monsters before her eyes.

So, she had only dealt with the monsters before her, not thinking about the cause of it all or whom to hate. Even if she had thought about it, she couldn't judge what was wrong.

However, now that the topic had been raised, she had to confront the concerns she had been holding back.

Where had all this started, and whose responsibility was it?

Had the traitors to humanity not actually betrayed them?

Were there actually others who deserved judgment?

Like many others who were confused, Redina also struggled to find her bearings amid the chaos.

What was important was that the things she had believed to be true were crumbling at a rapid pace.

Was the Demon King truly evil?

Had humanity truly been the victim?

As the boundaries of truth collapsed, everyone was thrown into a whirlwind of judgment.

In the end, Redina couldn't help but cautiously leave her tent.

Perhaps it was because sleepless nights were becoming more frequent as the end approached.

Redina could see someone else, who also couldn't sleep, sitting in a dark corner of the tent.

"Adriana…?"

It was none other than Adriana, who was absentmindedly staring up at the starry sky.

"Ah, Redina."

"What are you doing up so late?"

Redina cautiously sat down beside Adriana and asked.

"Just like that?"

Adriana smiled cautiously and said yes.

To Redina, Adriana had always been like an older sister, or rather, something even more significant.

When Adriana suddenly decided to leave the temple, Redina felt as if she was parting with life.

Seeing Adriana leave with a cold but sad expression, Redina felt overwhelmed.

Looking back, at that time—

Redina clearly remembered how Reinhardt's expression had also turned serious when Adriana said she would leave the temple.

Adriana never returned to the temple after that.

After the Gate incident erupted, she suddenly joined the temple's military.

Adriana still hadn't shared the details with Redina.

"Can't you sleep?"

"Uh-huh…”

Redina nodded at Adriana's question.

It would be a lie to say that Redina had no connection to the Demon King. Strictly speaking, it was more like a cursed relationship. However, upon reflection, it seemed ridiculous to call it a cursed relationship.

And undoubtedly, the connection with Reinhardt was much stronger for Adriana than for Redina.

"Adriana, have you heard the rumors?"

"Rumors? Ah… you mean that."

There were more than a few rumors, but the atmosphere among the allied forces was tense. Even those who were indifferent to gossip could easily pick up on the stories.

The subject related to Reinhardt was a taboo between Adriana and Redina.

That's why, even though it had been several years, it was almost the first time that the topic had come up, albeit indirectly.

"Adriana, what do you think?"

The unfounded rumors.

It was unclear how Cayer Voiden knew, but most of the rumors were said to be true.

Redina still had her doubts, but what should she do if it was indeed true?

No matter how much Redina thought about it, she couldn't figure it out.

After a long silence, Adriana looked at Redina.

"I think it's a sad thing."

It sounded like an insignificant remark.

But to Redina, it felt like a statement made after deep contemplation.

"Redina."

"Yes?"

"Let's make sure we survive."

Adriana firmly held Redina's hand and spoke quietly.

It was a statement that carried more determination and hope than ever before.

In truth, not much needed to be said.

Even though there were many unknown truths and countless unpredictable events, the goal was always the same.

To survive.

To live on in this world.

In the end, all the words were simply an extension of that.

Looking straight into Adriana's determined eyes, Redina ultimately—

Forgot all her worries.

It was too late to ponder the truth.

She had fought to survive.

She had fought to save.

Now, to put an end to it all.

"Yes."

All they needed to do was survive.

"Let's make sure we do."

Upon hearing that simple response, Adriana tightly embraced Redina.

Amidst the chaos, the allied forces, showing signs of division, advanced towards the already fallen capital of Riselen, Diane.

As they approached the location where the last gates were clustered, monsters appeared even though they hadn't yet reached the operation area.

Therefore, once the allied forces crossed a certain point, they had no choice but to maintain a constant battle-ready stance.

As they closed the distance to Diane, it was inevitable that the number of emerging monsters would increase.

The Immortals were constantly deployed, not only breaking through the advance route of the allied forces but also suppressing the monsters that circumvented the route and attacked from the rear.

The battle fatigue of the allied forces was not that high, as the tireless Immortal army was handling most of the surrounding combat.

Thus, the allied forces proceeded cautiously, bit by bit.

They were about to put an end to this long and arduous journey.

Allied Forces Command Center.

-Grrrrrrrrrr!

-Rumble!

The howls and screams of the colossal monsters, along with the booming sounds, could be heard in the distance.

"Tomorrow is the day."

Emperor Bertus quietly declared, looking at the gathered military commanders.

The expressions of the commanders varied.

There were those who had already chosen to side with the Demon King.

There were those who still stood by the empire.

And there were those who, somewhere in between, looked at the emperor with eyes full of suspicion.

Individual judgments and opinions did not matter.

As long as they were here, they had to fight.

No matter whose side they took, or who they supported.

They all needed to put an end to the Gate Incident to survive.

"Currently, the Immortals have set up a defensive line near the base, and from tomorrow, the entire army will advance towards Diane."

"Each force will move according to the detailed instructions given. There won't be much difference from the previous operations, but make sure to be familiar with it."

"Retreat is impossible."

"The rear areas beyond the reach of the allied forces are already teeming with monsters."

"Keep in mind that our forces are surrounded by monsters."

The allied forces, led by the Immortals, broke through the horde of monsters and penetrated into Diane. However, as the monsters continued to replenish, the path the allied forces had cleared was once again swarming with monsters.

The battle would not be fought in a linear fashion; it would unfold in every direction.

The number of people who could escape through teleportation was extremely limited.

Humanity's last army now stood in the absolute territory of death.

It was an attack that could not even be attempted without enduring such a dreadful ordeal.

Now that they had come this far, the allied forces had to achieve a single goal.

Destroy all of Diane's Warp Gates.

If the allied forces were annihilated without achieving this goal, humanity would perish.

With hardly anyone left on his side, everyone had no choice but to listen solemnly to Emperor Bertus's words, regardless of their feelings.

"Three colossal gates, five large gates, seven medium gates, and fifteen small gates."

"These are the last remaining Warp Gates in the world, and the Gate Incident will end once they are all destroyed."

"It took all of humanity's strength to get the allied forces this far."

"There is no next time."

"If even one Warp Gate remains while the army is annihilated, not only humanity but the entire world will come to an end."

At this solemn declaration, everyone's expression became somber.

The same was true for Rowan, the Holy Knight Commander.

There wasn't much left to convey.

In the end, they had to go and fight.

In the silence, someone spoke up, as if to acknowledge that this was the end.

"Your Majesty."

There was something that could only be said now.

Because it was the last of the last moments.

"Did Your Majesty truly cause the Gate Incident?"

At these words, the atmosphere in the room became tense.

There had been a time when just uttering those words would have been enough to warrant hanging.

However, the situation was quite special in many ways, so it was possible for such words to be spoken in front of the Emperor.

Emperor Bertus stared quietly at the person who had raised the question.

It was a question boiling in everyone's minds.

It was just that someone had finally spoken it as their representative.

Bertus looked at him with a stern expression.

"Is that important now?"

Neither a confirmation nor a denial.

However, strictly speaking, it was a statement leaning towards confirmation.

The Emperor closed his eyes as he spoke.

"May the gods bless us all."

That was probably.

The Emperor's only sincere wish.

The roars and explosions of countless monsters could be heard not too far away.

The offensive was to start the next day, but the battle was ongoing.

The weapons of war would be assembled and begin firing as soon as they arrived at the operational area, and once the offensive began, they would have to clear the way.

As it had always been with city sieges, the battle itself wouldn't last long.

If the battle dragged on, it would mean annihilation from the start. While their forces wouldn't be replenished, the enemies would continue to pour out at an unimaginable rate.

After the final meeting, the Emperor waited for the return from the warp spot.

There was no need for the Emperor to stay on the battlefield.

It was now uncertain whether the allied forces would follow the Emperor's orders, so the Emperor's presence had no real meaning.

The Emperor would only need to receive reports on the outcome of the battle from the imperial capital.

If the allied forces were annihilated, he would simply wait for the impending doom of humanity.

If the allied forces were victorious, he would wait for what was to come later.

While waiting for the teleportation spell cast by the royal mages at the warp spot, Saviolin Turner stood guard beside the Emperor.

Due to the unsettling rumors circulating among the allied forces, the Emperor's presence at the allied base was actually the most dangerous place for him.

That's why Saviolin Turner kept a close watch on their surroundings while guarding the returning Emperor.

There was no telling if someone, swept up by the strange rumors, would try to harm

the Emperor.

Only the Emperor and a few attendants would return.

Of course, Saviolin Turner was not only an excellent commander of Shanafel, but also an extremely powerful combatant, so she would participate in the final battle.

The future was uncertain.

However, Saviolin Turner was determined to bring victory in the battle to come tomorrow.

Whatever happened, she would make sure the wishes of everyone were fulfilled.

She vowed to deliver that news without fail.

"Your Majesty."

"Yes, Lady Turner."

Saviolin Turner wanted to resolve a lingering doubt, which might be their last.

"I have a question."

"Yes, please ask."

"That rumor……”

Saviolin Turner bit their lip, lowered their gaze, and spoke.

"Is it true, Your Majesty… that you are responsible?"

The rumor in question was, of course, that the Emperor was the mastermind behind the Gate incident.

It couldn't be anything other than a baseless rumor.

Saviolin Turner felt it when she first learned of the strange rumor spreading.

Reinhardt, the Demon King, wouldn't have done such a thing.

Rowan, the Holy Knight Commander, might have acted rashly, but she wouldn't have permitted it either.

In the end.

There could be only one source of the rumor.

At Saviolin Turner's question, the corner of the Emperor's mouth rose subtly.

"Well."

"…"

The Emperor did not give a straight answer this time either.

However, just as his previous answer at the headquarters was as good as an admission, what was different this time?

As Saviolin Turner gritted her teeth in bitter frustration, not knowing what to do in that moment.

"Lady Turner."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"You will not participate in the battle tomorrow."

At the Emperor's unexpected words, Saviolin Turner's eyes widened.

"Pardon…?"

"You have a different task to fulfill."

It was the final battle.

And the most important battle.

But Saviolin Turner had forgotten what to say in response to the shocking news that they were suddenly being pulled out.

"We'll discuss the details when we return."

"Your… Your Majesty…?"

Before Saviolin Turner could say anything further.

-Flash!

The flash of the mass teleport swallowed up the Emperor and Saviolin Turner.

CHAPTER 657

As dawn broke, the allied forces had spent the day defending their garrison. Now, they were about to welcome the morning of their advance.

And so, the morning arrived in Lazak.

Just like during the last battle, I had disguised myself as one of the soldiers in the allied forces.

In this guise, I would enter the battlefield as a single soldier and participate in the final battle.

However, just like last time, Harriet, Olivia, Liana, as well as the Vampire Lords, had all completed their preparations.

The Holy Knights and priests of the Holy Order, our full force, were already unknowingly deployed among the allied force.

Thus, as much as the allied forces were putting forth their full strength, so were we.

The five Vampire Lords, as well as the mages from each family, had also completed their preparations.

"I can go alone."

"By that logic, why should you go?"

“…Fair point."

In truth, there was a high possibility that our power wouldn't be needed.

That's why I could go alone.

However, if I were to argue that way, I couldn't explain why I needed to go in the first place, so everyone else had planned to follow.

But that wasn't all.

Not only Olivia Lanze, clad in the armor of a Holy Knight, was waiting for the departure.

"It's been a while since I fought instead of commanding."

Eleion Bolton had decided to participate in the siege of Diane as well.

No one had urged him, but he had volunteered.

Though he was a retired Holy Knight commander, he argued that nobody would recognize him if he wore a visor.

Like Olivia, who disguised herself as a Holy Knight, Eleion Bolton seemed to follow suit.

Charlotte offered to fight for a day as well but withdrew when I frowned.

Charlotte had combat capabilities, but she didn't know how to fight.

That's why Charlotte, with an uneasy expression, only came to see us off.

Airi also had tremendous combat power as a Succubus Queen, but since her horns made it impossible to disguise, I had told her not to come at all.

Our forces weren't as large as the allied forces.

But our army was already within the allied forces, so practically everyone capable of fighting in Lazak was heading for the battlefield.

The number wasn't great.

It made me wonder if this was really the full force of the Demon King.

However, with just this small group, I had come so close to swallowing the entire continent.

Anyway.

Before departure.

As a king, I should say something.

Not everyone was going to fight, but everyone was here.

Harriet.

Olivia Lanze.

Liana de Grantz.

Eleion Bolton.

Eleris.

Lucille.

Gallarush.

Luvien.

Antirianus.

The vampires of Thursday, Friday, and Saturday family.

Charlotte de Gardias.

Airi.

Sarkegaar.

"I don't know how to make grand speeches."

There was only one thing I could say in front of these people, who could be considered my full strength.

"Everything we've done so far has been to survive."

That's right.

We had done all of this to survive.

"So, let's survive."

There was nothing else to dream or wish for, other than survival.

Not only for these people but for all those who sided with me.

And for those who didn't side with me.

I prayed for their lives and survival after this.

In truth, the final battle had begun long before we reached Diane.

The seething monsters had been roaming beyond the city's boundaries for quite some time, and they continued to appear.

The day of battle was merely the moment when Diane arrived within a day's distance.

In truth, the final battle had essentially begun two days prior.

The allied forces cut through the waves of monsters.

As always, Ellen Artorius led the vanguard.

She sliced through the monsters with the edge of the void sword, donned the cloak of the sun god that burned all attacks, and relentlessly pushed forward.

-Waaaaaah!

-Kwaaaaaa!

The cries of the angry soldiers and the howls of the monsters tore through the world with terrifying intensity.

This was the final battleground.

Of course, the number of colossal monsters was incomparable to the previous battles, and the allied forces not only had to push forward, but also had to fend off the tidal wave of monsters coming at them from all directions.

It was a fight to see whether the annihilation of the allied forces would come first, or the destruction of all of Diane's warp gates.

To put it very cruelly, even if the allied forces were annihilated here, as long as the objective of destroying all warp gates was achieved, it would be enough.

The remaining monsters in the world could be slowly exterminated.

As long as no more monsters appeared.

Magic and flames, swords and claws clashed.

Poison, flames, and lightning poured from the mouths of flying monsters, scorching the ground.

In response, magic cannons and lightning strikes fired from the ground, tearing apart and burning the flying monsters in midair.

Countless lives were lost, both human and monster.

They all approached the end of this evil.

“Is the Titan here yet? Is the Titan coming?”

“The Titan will be summoned when the attack on Diane begins!”

The final battlefield, drenched in blood and covered in flesh, was incomparably brutal compared to the previous battles.

“Huh!”

-Kwaaaaarrr!

As sparks flew around Heinrich's eyes, a swarm of monsters that had been surging forward was swept away by a torrent of crimson flames.

Thousands of monsters were incinerated in an instant, and those that survived the flames broke through and slaughtered the soldiers.

There were monsters immune to fire.

Heinrich was familiar with that fact.

But he could never get used to the sight of people being killed by monsters that his powers couldn't handle.

-Flash!

-Boom!

However, when Heinrich saw the monster that had broken through the flames get struck by a bolt of lightning from the sky and explode, his eyes widened.

Lightning.

It was undoubtedly possible through magic.

But then.

-Kwooooooong

As the sky suddenly darkened, lightning began to churn between the black clouds.

Soon.

-Flash!

Heinrich couldn't help but squint his eyes at the blinding light.

In a very brief moment, dozens, no, hundreds.

No.

-Kwooooooong!

Heinrich could only stare blankly at the scene of thousands of lightning bolts

sweeping the battlefield and annihilating the monsters.

It didn't end with just one strike.

-Flash!

Thousands of lightning bolts per second rained down on the battlefield.

Even the highest-level magic spell, Thunderstorm, couldn't achieve this level of destruction.

The shower of lightning strikes dyed the battlefield in white light, erasing the monsters as if they were being wiped away by an eraser.

And it was happening across the entire battlefield.

“Liana…?”

Naturally.

Heinrich couldn't help but know who was in this place.

A storm of lightning struck from the ominous, overcast sky.

Like targeted shots, they pierced into the monstrous waves.

"Are you alright?"

"I'm so miserable I want to die."

Liana, with her dark eyes, grimaced and retched in response to Harriet's question.

In a corner of the allied forces' battlefield.

Only a few people knew that the downpour of lightning throughout the entire battlefield originated from Liana, who was retching in this very spot.

Despite the chilling depression, Liana continued to focus on her power.

More lightning.

More thunder.

With it, she erased the monsters and cleared the path.

"But now that I think it's all over, it's a problem because I feel like my mood is improving."

At Liana's dark joke, Harriet forced a smile.

Although they were surrounded, the allied forces were stronger than ever before.

And while their numbers were small, the Demon King's forces that had joined them could not be ignored.

If Liana's existence alone enabled her to perform tasks far beyond what several military divisions could accomplish, the same was true for each of the Vampire Lords and their kin.

It was premature to be optimistic already, but they couldn't help but see the situation as favorable.

Was this truly the end?

Worried about what would come next, Harriet began to wonder if the Gate Crisis could really end like this.

-Flash!

"Uh…?"

Flashes of light began to appear all over the battlefield.

It wasn't the light of destruction.

Where the flashes appeared, destruction didn't occur.

They vanished.

Both Liana and Harriet were in a position to overlook the entire battlefield, so they could see the simultaneous white flashes amidst the explosions and flames.

It wasn't a light related to destruction.

"Teleport…?"

It was undoubtedly the flash emitted by a spatial-based magic.

But through that light, no one was arriving.

They disappeared.

Along with the flashing lights, someone vanished.

It wasn't ordinary soldiers who disappeared.

It was soldiers wearing full-face helmets.

Liana mumbled in a daze as she witnessed the unbelievable scene.

"Are the Immortals… disappearing?"

Harriet, too, was wide-eyed at the spectacle.

"No way… It can't be. No way… It can't be…"

Harriet couldn't help but freeze in her terrible imagination.

But the reality unfolding before their eyes told them the truth.

The Immortals were withdrawing on their own accord.

"…Huff!"

Ludwig abruptly found himself forcibly teleported elsewhere, along with a cluster of white light, in the middle of slaying a monster.

"What…? What's going on…?"

Just as he had jumped into the battlefield and brought down a giant monster with a single blow, Ludwig was caught up in a recall spell without understanding why.

When Ludwig opened his eyes, he found himself in a familiar place.

The destination where the Immortals were recalled upon being damaged.

The underground research facility of Temple Magic University.

Although the Temple couldn't use spatial magic, limited teleportation was now possible within the underground facilities of the Magic University.

The Immortals had to return here for repairs if they were damaged.

Ludwig blankly stared at the vast hall lined with recovery ports and large vats.

Naturally, even if the Immortals weren't destroyed, they could easily be resummoned.

With a flash, it was not just Ludwig.

Alongside the flash, the Immortal mages and soldiers were being recalled at an incredible speed.

Seeing the mage casting the recall, Ludwig could not help but understand what was happening.

The Immortals were leaving the battlefield, and he too had been forcibly summoned by the recall magic.

There could only be one person capable of such a feat.

"Christina…?"

Ludwig let out a sigh as he spotted Christina, standing calmly amidst the gathering Immortals.

Nearby, in a makeshift healing station, Anna and Louis Ancton were leaning against a

wall, fast asleep.

It was clear they had been forced to sleep.

There was no way the two of them would agree to something like this.

"Don't panic, Ludwig. It's all part of the plan," Christina said with a stern expression, looking at the bewildered Ludwig.

"Christina? What are you… What are you trying to do?"

Ludwig couldn't accept the situation.

It was the final battle.

Just one step away.

But leaving that last step behind and withdrawing the most important force, the Immortals, from the battlefield was nothing short of madness.

No matter the intention, no matter how reasonable the purpose.

This was something that should never be done.

Seeing Ludwig's expression, Christina faintly smiled as if she knew what he was trying to say.

"You may not know, but most of the allied forces have sided with the Demon King. If the Gate crisis ends without any trouble, the entire alliance will fall under the Demon King's control."

"So… what do you intend to do?"

"If the alliance becomes the Demon King's, humanity will become the Demon King's as well."

Ludwig asked with his mouth, but he already knew.

He couldn't help but understand why Christina was doing this and what would happen next just by thinking about it.

"We can't leave it like that, can we?"

"No, Christina… No. This… This is not right! This is madness!"

Even if those who betrayed humanity and sided with the Demon King were despicable, and even if they couldn't be left alone, did that justify doing something like this?

In the end, it would be the powerless ones who would die first, and they had nothing to do with this situation.

Christina calmly said she would sacrifice them.

"It's not about annihilating the alliance. It's about reducing their numbers. We have enough Immortals to handle the situation."

If there was an army destined to fall under the Demon King's control, it was as good as already being his.

So, they would weaken them.

Using only the Immortals to choke them until they could no longer breathe.

"In the meantime, there's no better fortune than our enemies dying while fighting monsters, right?"

Ludwig's eyes widened as he stood up from his seat.

He couldn't stand idly by.

He just couldn't.

With a thud, Ludwig grabbed Christina by the collar.

"Stop this madness. Send the Immortals back to Diane immediately."

Ludwig may have crossed a line himself, but not to the extent of Christina.

He could never have imagined she would do something like this.

It was nothing but madness.

It was an insane act, one that couldn't be understood or accepted.

Despite Ludwig's cold voice, Christina smiled while being held by her collar.

"Really? So we should just deploy the Immortal like this and assume the Gate incident will be resolved?"

"Exactly! It's not too late to think about it once everything is over! Doing this, doing this isn't for anyone's benefit!"

"Then what about revenge?"

“…What?"

"More than half of the Allied Forces have fallen to the Demon King, and the Emperor is trying to abandon the empire. In the end, to exact revenge, you'll have to kill the Demon King, the Emperor, Ellen, and everyone else. Do you think it's possible to just kill the Demon King and leave everyone who sided with him alone? Do you believe it's possible to sift through the massive entity of the Allied Forces and only kill those who did wrong?"

"You… what are you… talking about…?"

"In the end, it's just the Gate monsters killing those who should die instead of the Immortal. The only difference is whether the Immortal kills them or the monsters do."

One faces not a person, but a group.

If the war ended without any major damage like this, it would only result in strengthening the Demon King's army even more.

It was better to weaken them beforehand.

Whether it was later or now, the Immortal had to kill a tremendous number of people.

"Ludwig. It's actually by doing this now that we can prevent a war between the

Immortal and the Allied Forces later on. If the Immortal and the Allied Forces fight, even more people will die, right?"

"That's just sophistry, Christina. It's not even a reasonable argument!"

If the Gate incident ended with the Allied Forces in good condition and the Immortal then turned against the Allied Forces, who had become the Demon King's army, even greater damage would result from the ensuing battle.

"By reducing their numbers in advance, won't the Allied Forces just surrender to the Immortal? They'll know they can't win. Think about it, Ludwig. This is the way to save lives."

To avoid killing even more later on, one condones the deaths now.

It's true that if the secondary battle between the Immortal and the Allied Forces, who had become the Demon King's army, resulted in the annihilation of the Allied Forces, then more people would die if the war ended like this.

However, if the Allied Forces suffered significant losses in the Gate War, they might unconditionally surrender to the Immortal, whether they had sided with the Demon King or not. In that case, fewer people would actually die.

If things went as Christina said, it would be true.

"People won't just wait to die. The Immortal won't be away from the battlefield for long either."

“…What?"

"Whether he's hidden somewhere watching the situation or disguised as something else. When they think the Allied Forces will be wiped out, those we need to kill will reveal themselves one by one."

"Are you saying… we should wait for that now?"

"Of course."

Someone had to fill the gap in power caused by the absence of the Immortal.

So if he was watching from somewhere, the Demon King's forces would reveal themselves.

Whether as individuals or groups, in some way or another.

"Once they reveal themselves, we'll deploy the Immortal again. The Immortal will kill those monsters and them too."

"…"

"Don't worry. If the Demon King reveals himself sooner, the Immortal will be redeployed to the battlefield just as quickly."

When the Demon King reveals himself to support the Allied Forces, the Immortal will go to the battlefield to kill him.

The plan was to exploit the Demon King's desire for the survival of humanity.

Ludwig believed that the Demon King should also be held responsible for this situation.

But was that really the case?

"This isn't… this isn't revenge… No, it's not. It's not! People are dying because of us, not the Demon King. If anything, we're the ones who should be killed, not the Demon King or the Emperor! Why do people have to die? Why should they be sacrificed for your whims? That's not why we've done all this! That's not why we created the Immortal!"

Ludwig couldn't help but cry out in anguish at the thought of spilling the blood of innocents to summon the Demon King for the sake of revenge.

"What are you talking about, Ludwig…?"

At Ludwig's question, Christina twisted her head, her collar gripped tightly.

"I've never once said… I'm doing this for the people…"

"What?"

"You're the same. You didn't want to do this for the people, but to make those who deserved punishment pay, didn't you?"

Ludwig had certainly said that.

"I just want revenge."

Christina had never claimed to represent the sacrificed or to be the voice for their grievances.

This was simply revenge on the world.

Nothing more than venting.

For someone.

They had never said they were doing this for a grand and happy ending.

The Immortal was created to end the Gate incident and use that power for revenge.

It was all about making those responsible pay.

Christina had never said she created the Immortal for the weak or to represent them.

"Weren't you the one who was mistaken?"

"…"

"Ludwig, your intentions. To kill the Demon King, to make people pay for these events. Weren't you secretly thinking it had something to do with justice or something grandiose?"

It was a determination unrelated to the judgment of good and evil.

Yet now, he was questioning why they were sacrificing the weak and invoking something akin to justice.

"If you thought this was a good or righteous thing, Ludwig… then you're still… still…"

With a horrifying smile, Christina said,

"You're still a fucking idiot."

It had always been about revenge.

They had started with vengeance in mind, seeking retribution.

And now, claiming that there were limits to what they could do, that they must maintain their morality, was laughable.

At Christina's words, Ludwig stared into her dark eyes, now filled with the abyss, his own eyes wide with disbelief.

"Maybe you're right… but… if this is what revenge is, if we have to do something like this to achieve it… if we're actually becoming the ones who should pay the price…"

Ludwig tightened his grip on Christina's collar.

"I won't take part in this so-called revenge."

Christina, who had become a monster, couldn't understand or accept it.

She had become an existence that shouldn't be in this world.

However, killing Christina was not an option either.

"Send me back. At least just me."

Upon hearing Ludwig's cold declaration, Christina's eyes widened.

"…Are you serious?"

Christina had somewhat sensed that he would say something like that.

"Yes."

"…"

"Whatever you do, I can't stop you with my power, and you won't listen to me. So, there's only one thing I can do."

Ludwig knew he couldn't persuade Christina.

Both had gone mad, each in their own way.

Persuasion was impossible from the start.

He knew that killing Christina would only cause greater chaos.

So, they decided to part ways.

They had to do it as quickly as possible.

That way, he could fight a little sooner on behalf of those who would die due to Christina's decision.

Christina had decided to let people die.

Ludwig, however, hadn't gone that far yet.

"Send me back."

Without the Immortal, the likelihood of dying on the battlefield was extremely high.

As if it didn't matter, Ludwig asked Christina to send him alone, and she stared at him silently.

Just as Ludwig couldn't persuade Christina, the opposite was also true.

He wouldn't say anything more about her actions, and she couldn't break his resolve to be sent to the battlefield.

“…Fine."

At Christina's command, the Immortal mages began casting.

"Don't die until the Immortal returns."

Somehow, Christina's words sounded amusing to Ludwig.

Was there still someone precious to her?

Even in this state.

Even while doing this.

Could she still say she didn't wish for anyone's death?

That was madness and, perhaps, the epitome of selfish human nature.

"Christina."

Just before the teleportation casting was completed, Ludwig looked at Christina and spoke.

"In the end, our choice was also the wrong one. The most terrible wrong one."

He couldn't find the right answer.

He realized that the so-called right answers were individual wrong ones created by everyone's thoughts.

In the face of the choices he had made,

Ludwig had to admit that not only himself but also Christina and the whole world had made the wrong choices, just as they had always suspected.

Everyone had chosen the wrong answer.

Those who had chosen the wrong answers were fighting each other, claiming their wrong answer was closer to the right one.

That was what was happening now.

Amid Ludwig's words, filled with self-mockery and contempt,

"Still, this wrong answer feels refreshing."

Rather than insisting that her wrong answer was the right one, Christina simply wanted to resolve everything.

-Flash!

Soon, Ludwig disappeared with a flash of light.

Without the Immortal, alone.

Ludwig wouldn't die easily.

He had been given a charm to not die easily.

All she had to do was wait.

Until the battlefield revealed those who had to be killed.

Then the Immortal would return to the battlefield and begin hunting.

Hunting monsters, as well as the Demon King and the Hero.

If they felt sorry for the dying people, they just had to reveal themselves sooner.

As Christina waited in silence for the situation she desired,

Ludwig had left, and in the quiet underground laboratory filled with Immortals, where Anna and Louis were sleeping,

-Step

-Step

Soon, somewhere, quiet footsteps began to be heard.

-Thud!

-Rumble!

And then, the sound of the sealed laboratory's barrier being destroyed began to resonate.

Christina's expression hardened.

The laboratory was in lockdown.

After the development of the Immortal was complete, no one was allowed to enter. All of the royal mages had been expelled, and in case anyone managed to break in, Immortal soldiers guarded the laboratory at various locations.

The sounds she was hearing implied that the Immortal forces were being defeated.

"…"

Christina stared intently at the entrance to the underground research wing.

Someone was coming.

Someone powerful enough to defeat the Immortals and break through the barrier.

A very powerful.

Entity.

-Kwagagang!

With an explosion close to a massive blast, the sealed entrance to the underground research wing shattered, and someone revealed their presence.

Christina looked at the person emerging from the rising dust.

It was a familiar face.

And someone who was not present in the allied forces' battlefield.

“…Saviolin Turner."

Christina muttered the name quietly as she gazed at Turner, who had appeared alone.

She was a woman who held the title of the world's strongest swordsman, yet she had not been able to participate in the Great Demon War.

And even now, as the world's strongest swordsman, she was unable to join the final battle.

She suddenly thought.

Perhaps this was a destiny or a curse laid upon her.

Unable to fight in the places where everyone remembered.

In the most glorious of places, where she could not stand.

It might be the fate of Saviolin Turner, the continent's greatest swordsman.

Not in the most glorious places of the Great Demon War.

Nor in the final battle that marked the end of the Gate incident.

There was no place for her.

The emperor had sent his sharpest sword to this place.

A cursed genius who was born with a destiny unable to fight where glory and honor resided.

Saviolin Turner closed her eyes quietly.

"Is this…”

In a place that no one in the world would remember.

In a dark underground devoid of glory and honor.

"my final battlefield?"

She had to face her most challenging battle.

CHAPTER 658

An Immortal, struck by a blue flash, turned to ashes and disappeared on the spot.

“…What?"

Christina stared at Saviolin Turner with a dumbfounded expression.

Christina didn't understand fighting.

However, that didn't mean she lacked common sense.

Saviolin Turner was undoubtedly known as the continent's top swordsman or the strongest knight on the continent.

But what Christina saw couldn't be considered a swordsman's battle.

Woosh!

The blue aura swords floating around Saviolin Turner proved it.

No, they didn't even take the form of swords.

They merely seemed like shapes formed by condensing mana into sharp edges.

In other words, they took on the shape of an aura closer to that of a 'spear.'

Since the start of the battle, Saviolin Turner had not drawn the Tempesta sword even once, fighting only by throwing aura blades.

That figure resembled a mage rather than a swordsman.

Christina knew this much at a common sense level.

Those who could strengthen their bodies with the power of magic were individuals who had reached the pinnacle of Magic Body Strengthening.

If they could go beyond that and enhance their weapons with magic, they were called the Master Class.

Going even further, those who could create weapons from aura alone, a level that few in human history had ever reached, were called Grandmasters.

"It's strange."

Saviolin Turner spoke while looking at the Immortal she couldn't easily approach and at Christina beyond it.

"I've been at the realm called Grandmaster for several decades now…"

As Saviolin Turner snapped her fingers, blue flashes collided with the Immortals attempting to attack her.

-Boom!

With an enormous explosion, several portals, along with the Immortals who couldn't react, disappeared.

"Why does everyone believe that I couldn't take even a single step forward from the realm of the 'Grandmaster'…?"

Last winter, Ellen Artorius had challenged her to a duel.

That battle didn't become intense, so the outcome was unknown.

However, the Saviolin Turner that Ellen Artorius imagined was different from the actual Saviolin Turner.

It wasn't just the beginning of the Grandmaster realm.

She had been at that realm for several decades, and her body was as youthful as in her heyday.

It was far too careless to think that she would remain stationary for decades, satisfied with that realm.

She was a person who had lived knowing nothing but the sword.

As she lived, she realized that she had nothing but the sword hanging from her waist.

That time.

That age.

The strongest person in the world, who earnestly realized the necessity of power after the Gate incident and devoted herself to refining herself once again, couldn't be the same as before.

Why would one who reached the peak stay in place?

Those at the peak continued to climb toward another goal.

It was a misjudgment to think that she could be reached with just a bit more effort.

No matter how hard those below diligently break through and pioneer the realms to climb up,

The peak might have already disappeared from where it stood decades ago, possibly having ascended even higher.

Thus,

Saviolin Turner had become an existence where the title of a swordsman now felt strange.

She didn't need a sword.

It wasn't because she didn't need a sword when she had a physical sword or an aura sword.

She simply didn't need one anymore.

The reason for truly wielding a sword and fighting had vanished.

Saviolin Turner was a being who had reached the ultimate state, where everything was ultimately interconnected.

Those who had confronted Saviolin Turner and disappeared after being pierced by

that unfathomable spear were all individuals who had reached the Master Class.

Even those beings vanished with a single blast of aura.

The mental manipulation magic used by Archmages was also completely ineffective.

Anti-magic training was an essential part of a knight's training in order to counteract magic.

Therefore, it was only natural that magical control methods did not work on Saviolin Turner, who represented the pinnacle of knights.

The sword didn't work, nor did the magic.

Christina gritted her teeth and said,

"Fine… I get that you're strong. But can you handle everything that's coming?"

"…"

The full force of the Immortals had gathered in this underground area.

It was the force that should have been fighting in Diane.

No matter how much of an extraordinary powerhouse Saviolin Turner was, there were still impossibilities.

The fact that she was now surrounded did not change.

It was as if a lone tiger had been cornered by a pack of cats.

But if those cats could keep attacking the tiger until it was exhausted and collapsed, the tiger would eventually die.

So, no matter how strong Saviolin Turner was, she had merely entered the enemy territory unarmed.

Her inevitable demise might be delayed, but it would eventually come.

The reason Saviolin Turner could hold on now was because the battlefield itself was

limited.

The destruction of the laboratory itself would affect the existence of the Immortals.

Therefore, the battle hesitated to escalate, as the entire laboratory could be destroyed if it became too intense.

The space was narrow, and the Immortals could not attack properly because they had to protect the laboratory.

No matter how much stronger Saviolin Turner was than what was known to the world, the fact that she had entered the enemy's territory willingly did not change.

Despite Christina's words, Saviolin Turner summoned a few more spears of aura.

"You'll know when you try."

At that confidence, which was almost arrogant, Christina had no choice but to grit her teeth.

-Flash!

With a flash of light, Ludwig reappeared on the distant battlefield.

There were no Immortals.

“The monsters are coming!”

As the sudden appearance of a strong ally vanished, the sight of the confused allied forces entered Ludwig's eyes.

The collapse of the allied forces was imminent.

The existence of the Immortals was important, but not absolute. The allied forces could fight without the Immortals.

However, the crumbling morale would bring everything down like dominos.

Christina was wrong.

No, she hadn't even tried to find the right answer in the first place.

Knowing it was the wrong answer, she had declared she would do something crazy just for revenge.

Slowly, Ludwig took out a crystal vial from his pocket.

Then, he uncapped it and drank the contents.

"Ugh…"

It was an artificially created, terrible taste that he couldn't understand how it was made.

Having taken the stabilizer, Ludwig roughly wiped the drool from his mouth.

-Growl!

Ludwig had no army.

All he had was his own body.

He couldn't fill the gap left by the missing Immortals alone.

There was much he could do with his stronger body. But in the end, the fact that he had only one body didn't change.

Amidst the battlefield filled with screams and monstrous roars, Ludwig could kill the monsters before him, but it still had nothing to do with the outcome of the war.

He simply fought.

-Boom!

With several leaps, Ludwig plunged into the midst of the monsters, his right hand holding the Aura Sword, which was formed by black magic.

-Whoosh!

With a single, seamless spinning slash, a torrent of dark aura surged forth, sweeping away the surrounding monsters.

Ludwig could clearly hear the soldiers' awe from afar as they watched his overwhelming, albeit ominous, power.

Although still unrelated to the outcome of the war.

There was definitely a role for Ludwig in localized battles.

Someone wielding the pitch-black Aura Sword in the form of a greatsword strode unhesitatingly across the battlefield.

Instead of retreating, others followed upon witnessing that overwhelming presence.

Everyone had not been like this originally.

Neither Christina nor the others who had changed.

The days when they could laugh and chat happily together had all turned into illusions.

Some became the villains who needed to be killed, while others became villains themselves in their attempts to kill the villains.

And Ludwig, who watched all this, had also become an entity dreaming of his own evil while claiming to judge something.

Those they loved had gone to places where they could no longer be loved.

Those who survived had fallen to unworthy existences.

But one thing remained unchanged.

Fighting for the people.

Fighting to save someone.

Because they had not abandoned that one absolute path.

Because they could not turn away from that.

"Kuh… ah…!"

-Boom!

He fought.

Enduring the burning agony in his right arm.

Resisting the eerie sensation of the dark magic invading his flesh and thoughts.

Without even thinking about wiping away the blood tears in his eyes.

Ludwig swung his sword.

"Uwaaaaaah!"

Like a beast engulfed in black magic, turned into a lost, black predator.

The black beast massacred the monsters and moved forward.

The Immortals had left the battlefield.

In an instant, they all disappeared.

The majority of the Allied Forces knew what the Immortals were. Even those who didn't believe the rumors knew they were powerful allies.

They vanished entirely.

“Where… Where are they going?”

After the Immortals were deployed, all battles were planned with their involvement in mind.

The Immortals had demonstrated more power than expected.

That's why, even for those who knew the true nature of the Immortals, no one questioned their absolute necessity, though there might be issues with the process.

Think later.

For now, they were necessary.

Because they were needed, they remained silent.

They knew it was something that shouldn't be done, but it was too necessary.

The Allied Forces recognized and depended on the Immortals' effectiveness.

I was no exception.

-Growl!

-Boom!

Shattering a monster's head with a fistful of magical energy, I could only stare blankly at the waves of monsters rushing into the void left by the Immortals.

Did it have to come to this?

Did it have to come to this extent?

I believed that at least a minimum of rationality would remain.

They wanted to kill me, and they wanted to punish the mastermind behind the Gate incident.

But did they want me dead so much that they'd suddenly abandon everyone like this?

Where is the necessity for going this far?

Despite knowing that too many people were relying on the Immortals, they suddenly disappeared.

Suddenly, the Immortal vanished, and the advancing army hesitated, starting to

clumsily retreat.

With the thousands of Master Class warriors who had been sweeping the path ahead, and the destructive magic that the Archmages in the rear had been pouring down, the army's hesitation was inevitable.

It was only natural that the vanguard disappeared, and they had no choice but to follow.

They gritted their teeth and forged ahead, but in the end, there was only one body.

In areas where I could not take charge, the battlefront was gradually pushed back.

Confusion and fury, bordering on nausea, welled up from within, but there was no stopping.

The Immortal was gone.

Gone.

“The vanguard is gone!”

“Run away!”

It was dangerous.

The Immortal certainly made up a significant part of their power.

However, in the original work, the last battle could still be fought even without the Immortal, even without the Titan.

It was possible.

They could definitely do it.

The evaporation of the Immortal also evaporated their morale.

Commanders and soldiers alike began to make fearful speculations.

“He abandoned us!”

Broken morale was as contagious as a plague.

Others who followed the terrified soldier's cries began to emerge.

It was possible.

The battle would be more difficult without the Immortal, but it wasn't impossible.

More people would die, but they wouldn't be annihilated.

It was possible even without the Immortal. In the final battle, the Immortal may have left, but the allied forces' strength was more than enough. They had come this far with plenty of intact forces.

However, the Immortal held too much significance for the alliance, and its sudden disappearance brought with it immense betrayal and a tremendous drop in morale.

Once the front line began to crumble, the rear line would follow suit.

If the entire alliance lost its morale and collapsed, it would be the end.

The entire alliance was currently advancing, surrounded by monsters.

If they collapsed, they would be swallowed up and annihilated with nowhere to retreat.

“The Emperor has abandoned us!”

At some point, the soldiers' screams about the Immortal's disappearance had turned to this.

The Empire's secret weapon.

The Immortal was gone.

That meant the Emperor had abandoned humanity.

In fear and terror.

Those following the Demon King began to appear among the allied forces.

That's why those who believed the Emperor had abandoned the alliance were retreating and yelling.

It wasn't the Emperor who abandoned them.

It wasn't Bertus who abandoned them.

But it held no meaning.

There was no way to persuade and convince soldiers who were shouting out of fear and despair.

There was no time to be angry about the madness that forced the Immortal to retreat.

However.

If they retreated like this, everything would be over.

They had relied too much on the Immortal.

That's why the void left by the Immortal seemed dozens of times larger than it actually was.

“We're all going to die! We're dying!”

“Run away!”

There was nowhere to run.

Crying out that they were surrounded was pointless.

Retreating would only cause them to trample their allies, eventually collapsing and being crushed to death. Then, the waves of monsters would come crashing down, and it would be the end.

And so.

As the betrayal of the Emperor swept across the battlefield and plunged the alliance into panic.

-Krrrrrrrr!

The sky shattered.

Dark cracks appeared in the heavens.

Not just one, but dozens of them.

Not just above the heads of the allied forces, but all over the battlefield.

Cracks like spiderwebs, projecting darkness, appeared in the blue sky, as if it were a broken mirror.

"Ah…”

It was the sky.

Naturally, everyone could see the sky.

The soldiers who threw down their weapons and fled, the countless superhumans who didn't know what to do and kept looking back, and the mages who gritted their teeth and poured magic from the rear would all have seen it.

A torrent of light pouring from the shattered sky.

They saw a meteor shower raining down on the battlefield.

It was a magic that had become trauma for everyone.

The day the sky opened up.

That was when it all began.

That's why it was a cursed magic for all humanity.

"The Demon King…”

Everyone gazed blankly at the sky and uttered those words.

"It's the Demon King's magic!"

The falling meteors.

It had become a magic symbolizing the Demon King for humanity, for all those who remembered that day.

For everyone who had witnessed that day on the Imperial Capital, it was a magic that meant the end of the world.

"The Demon King's magic is coming!"

The reason people's voices, shouting at the sight of magic that was no different from the symbol of the Demon King, were not desperate was because…

"Kwaaaagg!"

It was raining down on the monsters, not humans.

"Yes…"

If there was something to be done.

In this situation.

If there was something to be done in front of those who betrayed and ran away.

There was only one thing I could do.

I took off my helmet.

I returned to my original form, which I hadn't taken for a while.

With a pair of horns.

An Archdemon.

In the form of Valier.

And I summoned them.

"Woong!"

Tiamata in my right hand.

Alsbringer in my left hand.

No words were needed.

Everyone just had to watch.

I could no longer be a Demon King disguised as a mere soldier.

"Oh, oh…"

"Ah…"

Those nearby began to gasp in horror.

No words were needed.

"Woong!"

The Fire of the Tuesday, reacting to the magic power pushed to its limit, began to rip and burn the sweltering monsters drawn in by the reaction.

I ran.

Into the waves of monsters.

I charged in, using all my strength now.

The golden Tiamata wasn't strictly necessary.

"Woong!"

The devastating power of corruption pouring from the dark demonic sword Tiamata tore the monsters apart, and the blue magic power pouring from Alsbringer crushed them.

And the flames emitted by the Fire of the Tuesday opened the path by burning the monsters.

The talk of the emperor's betrayal disappeared.

"The Demon King…”

"The Demon King has appeared!"

People began to shout about the appearance of the Demon King.

And the fact that there could be such a hopeful resonance in the words "Demon King" spoken by humans.

In this situation, somehow.

It felt ridiculous.

CHAPTER 659

In the midst of the battlefield.

Olivia Lanze, too, was fighting while wearing the armor of a Holy Knight.

The thousands of meteorites pouring down from the torn sky shook the ground with their impacts.

And Olivia could clearly see the huge waves of flame and flashes of light that engulfed the monsters.

"Reinhardt…”

The Immortal had disappeared, and the Demon King's troops had invaded.

Everyone would know that the Demon King's troops were not aimed at humanity, but at the monsters.

Would this misunderstanding end?

However, this story was only about covering one misunderstanding with another.

Covering the misconception that the Demon King wanted to exterminate humanity with the misconception that the Emperor had abandoned humanity.

Reinhardt may not have intended it, but the situation was flowing in that direction.

However, covering one misunderstanding with another was only possible if the Allied Forces survived.

Destroying all the warp gates and ensuring everyone's survival.

The annihilated Allied Forces couldn't return to humanity with any truth or misunderstanding.

First, they had to survive.

That's why Reinhardt had removed his mask and revealed himself as the Demon King.

He showed the magic that killed the monsters.

To support the collapsing Allied Forces caught in their own trap.

The mask had to be removed.

Any strong power would do.

Although the Immortal was gone, everyone needed to know that there was a powerful ally who would not bow to the monsters.

So.

Flick!

Olivia also threw off her helmet.

As she untied the band that held her hair, Olivia's brilliant platinum blonde hair fluttered in the wind of the battlefield.

In such a miserable battlefield, there was a presence that couldn't help but draw attention, and it was Olivia Lanze.

Even before the Gate Incident, Olivia Lanze had gained enormous fame under the name of the Saint of Eredian.

She had participated in the Great Demon War, and although she had taken a supporting role, she had gained an uncharacteristic nickname of "Deathbringer" for killing countless demons.

However, even that fame was meager compared to the infamy she gained after the Gate Incident.

A traitor of humanity.

She became more famous as a villainess rather than a saintess, and wanted posters for the traitors who betrayed humanity were posted in every city where humanity

still existed.

Those who had even a bit of hatred towards the Demon King, of course, would have no choice but to know the faces of the three traitors of humanity as well as the Demon King's face.

Olivia Lanze.

Harriet de Saint Owan.

Liana de Grantz.

One of the three, Olivia Lanze, revealed herself.

Olivia Lanze…

The Demon King's Saintess!

Those among the soldiers in the battlefield who recognized her face could only be horrified, while those who didn't know her could only look at her following the horror of others.

Even the Holy Knights were appalled at the fact that she was wearing the armor of a Holy Knight and fighting alongside them in the battlefield.

But it was the middle of the battlefield.

There was no time to discuss their horror and fear now.

They had to fight.

It was the same for Olivia.

She killed monsters.

The Empire had raised warriors to create an army to kill monsters.

In the end, what they needed was power.

The power to kill monsters.

It didn't matter what the source of that power was.

The power to kill the enemy.

The power to end all of this.

People wanted that.

Rumble!

The power that extended from Olivia's hands was clearly, not benign.

It was not the white and golden power used by the saint of purity, but rather, dark and sinister energies that emanated from Olivia's body.

For a moment, people were aghast at the sight of the seemingly malevolent dark power.

Grrr

The ground, imbued with this dark power, began to tremble, and something started to emerge from beneath the earth.

One by one, ominous beings appeared, oozing an inky black aura of corruption that was not found in simple low-ranking undead.

Countless Death Knights erupted from the ground.

But that was not all.

Screeeech!

As the skeletons rose from the ground, they waved their hands in the air, and one by one, they mounted translucent phantom steeds that were nothing but bones.

The Death Knights began to grasp the reins of the phantom horses.

Olivia Lanze, too, leapt lightly onto a phantom steed.

The saint, now turned wicked, looked down upon the terrified humans.

"Let's go."

Snap!

With a harsh crack of the reins, the phantom horses didn't run but slid at an incredible speed towards the wave of monsters.

Led by Olivia Lanze, countless Death Knights followed behind, mounted on their phantom steeds.

Screeeech!

The piercing cries of the phantom horses drowned out the monstrous wails.

Crunch crunch!

The phantom horses' procession trampled the monsters ruthlessly as they advanced.

It was as if a ship was breaking through a tidal wave.

Everyone stood dumbfounded as they watched the phantom horses trample the horde of monsters.

And then, as if it was a signal,

Several of the Holy Knights who had been fighting on the battlefield suddenly mounted the phantom horses and joined the procession.

"What… what on earth…”

Olivia Lanze, who had disappeared as a saint, now wielded the powers of darkness and corruption, just like her altered reputation.

What's more, a few of the Holy Knights of the Order used the very power of corruption they were supposed to oppose.

The Demon King's forces were within the Order.

Their use of the cursed power was clear.

However,

Roaaarrr!

Screeech!

It was also clear that they were attacking the monsters, not humans.

Everyone was in their place, doing their part.

They were all doing their best to fill the void left by the Immortal.

Everyone's power was different, so they couldn't all fight together in the same place.

Reinhardt had his place.

Liana had her place.

Olivia had her place.

And the Vampire Lords and their followers had their place as well.

Of course, Harriet had her place too.

The Vampire Lords were summoning meteors to repel the monsters.

Both Reinhardt and Olivia were at the forefront, revealing themselves to keep the morale of the allied forces from crumbling.

Harriet was by Liana's side, who was concentrating her mind to summon even greater power after the Immortal's disappearance.

Harriet seemed to know why the Immortal had been withdrawn.

She must have known that it would come to this.

It was not unthinkable, but she had never expected such a move.

Did she hate us that much?

Why did she hate us so much?

Even knowing that the Demon King would take such actions to save everyone, the fact that they were being used meant they understood what the Demon King was thinking.

Why on earth did she have to go through all this, Harriet didn't know.

She couldn't understand it either.

But now was not the time for anger, confusion, or tears of injustice.

She knew that rather than complaining about the unfairness and irrationality of this situation, she had to support the crumbling alliance.

That's why, knowing she was trapped, she tried her best.

"…"

Harriet de Saint-Owan.

The magical genius, known as the greatest talent in history, had already accomplished numerous miracles.

However, those miracles had little to do with war.

Now, Harriet de Saint-Owan's genius was needed.

This time, more than ever.

She had to demonstrate her genius in destruction.

Quietly, Harriet took out a pair of earrings she had been keeping in her pocket.

Small, matching earrings.

"'Tranquility magic is permanently engraved into this artifact,' they said. 'I don't need it, and Ellen doesn't either. So, it's for you. If you can maintain your composure

while using magic, casting will be easier, right?'"

Earrings imbued with mental stabilization magic.

A treasure brought back from the Darklands by Reinhardt and Ellen.

As an apology, Reinhardt had given them to Harriet, who was feeling down, watching the pair create a secret she couldn't be a part of.

No, from the beginning, he had intended to give them to Harriet, regardless of the apology.

Although it was undoubtedly a valuable item, it might not hold great significance to Harriet anymore.

In reality, it didn't.

Even without wearing these earrings, Harriet had reached the point where she could maintain her composure during battle.

That's why she carried them around but didn't bother wearing them.

She believed that obtaining composure through magic manifested by an artifact was far from a way to become stronger on her own.

However, now was the time when she needed to borrow any power she could get.

She couldn't know how much help this small pair of earrings would be, but they held great significance.

They were Harriet's treasure.

A possession brought back by her loved one and her precious friend.

Silently, Harriet put on the pair of earrings.

The subtle green glow of the earrings provided minimal tranquility effects.

But it was not the magic imbued in the earrings, but the meaning behind them that calmed Harriet's heart.

She would succeed.

No matter what it was.

Reinhardt, fighting in the front.

And Ellen, fighting even beyond him.

And everyone on this battlefield.

For her loved one and her precious friends.

And for everyone.

So their end wouldn't be brought by such monsters.

To reach a proper conclusion for the two of them.

She had to succeed, no matter what.

Although objects couldn't hold feelings, believing they did.

"Even if it's the second, it's okay. No, even if it's the third. Even if it's the last……."

Knowing the meaning behind the earrings, not the magic, Harriet gained the help of her heart, not magic.

"Even then, it's fine……."

Now, there was no confusion or sorrow in Harriet's calm eyes.

There was no room for emotions such as resentment, sorrow, or pettiness.

A time when even surviving was an overwhelming challenge.

In that final battle.

Wishing for happiness for everyone was a luxury.

Just survive.

Let's finally reach the end of everything.

So, it's alright if my place is a little far away.

As long as I can survive.

If only she could reach the end.

Then, whatever it took would be fine.

-Grrrrrrrrrrrr!

In a place on the battlefield filled with the agonized screams of flying monsters.

Harriet de Saint-Owan began to take a deep breath.

"Whoooo……”

Blue magical lines appeared all over Harriet's body.

On her earrings as well.

And from the power cartridge hanging around her neck, light surged.

The method of instantly activating magic by infusing mana into her body, like a magical scroll.

Harriet conceived this idea in her first year at the Temple Royal Class and realized it.

She also developed a power cartridge that allowed her to use external mana as if it were her own internal mana.

Time passed.

Harriet didn't live her life in battle and strife, but used her magic primarily to support Reinhardt.

Although she had shown her power in battles up to now, she had never been the main character.

However, just because she wasn't the main character in a fight didn't mean she didn't think about it.

It wasn't for nothing that she scribbled something every night beside the sleeping Reinhardt.

Magic that was beneficial to people.

Magic that took care of the wounded.

Magic that created new warp gates.

Among them, how could there not have been magic for destruction?

After all, she spent her days where strength and fighting were the most important.

How could she not have conceived such magic?

Now, she had to show it.

Something she had never tried before.

Something she hadn't even thought was possible.

Something that had never succeeded even once.

Magic that existed only in her imagination.

Now, she had to bring it into reality.

What she could achieve if her talent was used not for creation, but for destruction.

It was time to show it.

The blue magical lines drawn on Harriet's body soon began to fall off her skin.

The magical lines that had been engraved on her body were now leaving her flesh.

The blue magical lines that materialized in the air, floating like threads.

"Harriet…?"

Liana blankly stared at Harriet, who was doing something.

"…"

With wide eyes, Harriet bit her lip, seemingly concentrating on something.

She was so focused that she didn't even notice her bitten lip tearing and blood flowing.

Magic that used her body as a magical scroll.

This was only possible for Harriet de Saint-Owan.

But now, those magical lines had left her body.

A power cartridge that allowed her to use external mana like her own internal mana.

All the principles of the power cartridge were in Harriet's head.

However, even with the multiple improved power cartridges hanging around Harriet's neck, there was still not enough mana to realize the magic she wanted to implement.

No matter whose mana it was, they wouldn't be able to implement the magic that Harriet imagined.

What is magic?

Harriet had pondered this for a long time.

Even now, magic is the domain of geniuses.

However, in the distant past.

There was a time when even the most brilliant geniuses could not touch magic.

There was no method of using internal mana.

No way to accumulate mana within the body.

When magic had to be used by controlling external mana.

There were so few mages like that in the world that they could be counted on one hand.

Even those few mages could only perform tiny miracles with their genius.

In the distant past, magic was such a thing.

'How is it?'

'You… can actually do this… '

'It's not much, but that's all I can do.'

The Lord of Tuesday.

Eleris knew some methods of harnessing the mana of nature.

When asked if one could use the mana of nature as their own, Eleris demonstrated a small but magnificent miracle.

It was an easy task for modern-day mages, but the magic was performed using ancient methods.

She could summon flames, lightning, and even a fireball, although it took a long time to do so.

"Could I do it, too?"

Even for a being who had lived hundreds of times longer than herself, it was barely possible.

To the ancient entity, the young mage's question could only be seen as a childish boast.

A mere twenty-something, like her, could have been scolded for daring to dream of such heights.

However, Eleris understood the longing in Harriet's question.

"Of course, Harriet. You'll be much better at it than I am."

Thus, the Lord of Tuesday didn't mock Harriet, instead teaching her everything she knew.

Reinhardt always felt sorry for not being able to provide a better environment for Harriet.

But that was a misunderstanding born from ignorance.

Harriet had an environment that was unmatched on the entire continent.

She was in the company of the Five Vampire Lords, who had existed for an unfathomable amount of time.

To simply call them archmages would be an understatement.

Beyond their magical prowess and skill, they possessed countless spells and arcane knowledge gathered over a long time.

Harriet was in the company of great mages who could not only possess this knowledge but also put it to practical use.

Whenever she had a question, she could ask them, and they would impart vast amounts of knowledge she had never known before.

Having lived for so long, their magical achievements had essentially stagnated.

They had all reached their individual limits.

Yet, they did not hesitate to pass on their knowledge to Harriet, who was willing to try anything.

All of the Vampire Lords were curious about how far someone with an unparalleled talent could go.

So, ever since Harriet arrived in Edina, she had been like a disciple to the Five Vampire Lords.

Most mages couldn't even have a single archmage as their mentor.

But Harriet had five Vampire Lords, who had existed for an incredibly long time, as her mentors.

Sometimes, she learned from Eleris.

Sometimes, from Lucinil.

Sometimes, from Luvien.

Sometimes, from Gallarush.

And sometimes, from Antirianus.

She received countless knowledge and inspiration from them.

So, Harriet wasn't in a poor environment, but in the best one possible.

The greatest genius in history had been studying magic in an unprecedented environment.

Harriet de Saint-Owan had been spending moments bound to push her talents to their limits.

Now, it was time to show the world the fruits of her labor.

Her vast knowledge and wisdom.

The knowledge that had accumulated since ancient times, transformed into wisdom, would now be manifested by a young mage barely in her twenties.

Harriet developed a system that allowed her to use magic almost instantly by turning her own body into a real-time magical scroll.

Harriet created a power cartridge that allowed her to use external mana as if it were her own internal mana.

And Harriet sought the ancient magic – the method of using the mana of nature.

In fact, Harriet had once created a magic circle on the spot and, with her own mana depleted, called down lightning through the mana of nature.

Already, Harriet had discovered a principle similar to drawing magic circles on her own body and implementing magic at high speeds. However, once the magical power contained within the vessel known as the body was depleted, and once the power contained within another vessel called the power cartridge was depleted, magic could no longer be implemented.

Thus, a vessel approaching infinity was necessary.

She would use the vessel called nature.

If she could implement magic using a vessel that was nearly infinite, she could use magic beyond her limits, approaching infinity.

But using a vessel that transcended the physical realm was by no means an easy task.

"What would be the difference between that and the Akasha?"

"Pardon?"

Upon hearing Harriet's idea, Antirianus spoke with a meaningful smile.

"Isn't it essentially the same thing, a magic that can contain all other magics and a magic that can implement all other magics?"

Hearing his words, Harriet realized how grand her dream was.

However, the old monster hadn't said that to discourage her from dreaming.

"Wasn't Akasha just a magical tool? Why wouldn't it be possible for magic to implement the vision of a scribe?"

He said there was more than enough possibility for Harriet.

"Akasha was a magical tool that recorded and reproduced the principles."

"I've heard so."

"Then, who can say that you cannot create magic that is the origin of all principles?"

In the end, Harriet's dream was more magnificent than she had imagined.

While the principles might be different, ultimately, she would create magic similar to Akasha.

But it didn't need to be exactly the same as Akasha.

There was no need to reproduce everything.

Only the implementation of magic was enough.

Hence, the magic she dreamed of was one.

"Everything."

More precisely, "the origin of magic that can become anything."

Just like Akasha.

As the Akasha that was used for destruction created and unleashed anything upon the world.

If she could create magic that could implement any other magic, she could create all the magic in the world.

In other words, the seed of all magic.

The fundamental magic that changes depending on how the seed is germinated.

Akasha was a tool that recorded all principles.

Harriet didn't intend to create Akasha, nor did she think it was possible for her.

There was no need to record and know all the principles.

No need to create anything.

She would create an Akasha capable of implementing only magic.

An absolute principle that could become all principles.

With just that one thing, all magic could be created.

Gathering everything in the world and making it one.

That was Akasha.

So then,

The one that could become everything.

Wasn't that Akasha as well?

Even if the methods were different but the results were the same.

It might be smaller in scale.

But it could also be called Akasha.

Akasha became the world.

But Harriet couldn't dream of that much.

To create countless "ones," a vast amount of magical power was needed.

Therefore,

Nature's mana.

She must draw upon the world's magical power.

That was not possible.

No one even tried.

But there was someone who had definitely said that such an absurd thing could be possible.

Why not give it a try?

You can do it, can't you?

"Didn't you say it's impossible without even trying?"

"Do you think people are foolish enough not to use that method? The modern magical theory created by people smarter and more talented than you after making great efforts…"

"Could all those people be idiots?"

"…What?"

At that time, she had thought that the words were spoken just to torment her.

But they were not.

The speaker had been sincere.

"What if all those people are dumber than you, and that's why they created the current magic theory?"

"W-what… What the hell are you talking about?"

"All the mages who have ever existed could be more foolish than you."

Despite her being far from even the rank of a great mage at that time, he spoke with unwavering confidence.

"Are you… serious?"

"Of course, I am."

He had spoken so boldly about something no one would believe.

"How much of a genius do you think I am? On what basis do you think so highly of me?"

"You'll become the greatest mage on the continent, no, in the history of all races. You know my ability?"

"Uh, yeah…"

The ability to believe in oneself and make that belief a reality.

It was a bizarre power, but ultimately, it was the driving force that had brought him this far.

"I believe in you like that."

With that power, he had clearly stated his belief without a hint of doubt.

Reinhardt had no doubt in his mind.

Harriet didn't believe that all mages in the world, or throughout history, were more foolish than herself.

But there was someone who believed so.

Someone who believed in her and told her she could do it.

So, in response to that faith.

That absurd faith.

She had to answer.

Even though she didn't think that way.

'If you think so.'

'I will believe once that I am such a being.'

'I will hope that I am such a being.'

'Yes.'

'The greatest in history.'

'Unprecedented.'

‘I will show the world what the strongest mage can do.’

‘With infinite mana.’

‘I will become the mage of infinity.’

-Krururung!

Harriet's hair fluttered, and the power cartridges around his neck jostled.

She used her own magical power and the power of the cartridges as ingredients.

In other words, it was like a spark.

A spark to ignite a massive flame had to be created by Harriet's hand.

Blue lines of magical power emerged from Harriet's body and shot into the air, taking shape.

The blue lines of magical power pouring from Harriet's body soon became visible to the other mages far away from her.

-Krururururung!

No one but Harriet herself knew what was happening.

Blue strands sprouting from Harriet's body began to take shape in the sky.

Though no one had ever seen or attempted anything like it, the mages couldn't help but recognize what it was.

Lines drawn in the air.

Shapes.

Symbols.

Characters.

Their interconnections.

“A magic circle…?”

“Is that… a magic circle?”

Most magic circles take on a two-dimensional form. However, Harriet was drawing a magic circle in the air with lines of magical power, a form that had never existed before.

A three-dimensional drawing.

And beyond that.

In order to detect and absorb the real-time fluctuations of mana, the shape of the magic circle that absorbed the mana of nature also had to change in real time.

A four-dimensional magic circle that didn't have a fixed form but changed its shape in real time depending on the situation was drawn in the air.

No, it was woven.

-Krururung!

The lines of magical power pouring from Harriet's body shot into the sky, taking the shape of a massive sphere.

It appeared as if a giant star made of magic was being formed.

Liana, too, watched the bizarre transformation occurring alongside the storm of magical power with wide-open eyes.

When the storm-like anomaly came to an end,

All the nearby mages could see something manifested in the sky.

A blue, glowing spherical magic circle. No, a magical star.

The origin of principles capable of implementing all the laws of magic.

Therefore, it could be said to represent the very laws of the world itself.

The myriad phenomena of the universe.

CHAPTER 660

"What… what is that?"

Lucinil could not hide her astonishment as she gazed at the magical star that suddenly appeared in the sky above the gathering of the Vampire Lords' mages.

It was a form of magic she had never seen before, and she couldn't comprehend what it was.

"It seems our adorable scribe has caused quite an accident," Antirianus chuckled as he looked at the enormous sphere.

Lucinil glared at Antirianus as he cast a large-scale destruction spell.

"Harriet? What is that thing in the first place?"

"I don't know."

"Why do you act like you know something…"

-Flash!

But before Lucinil could finish speaking, a flash of light shot from the massive magical sphere and struck the midst of the monster horde.

It was simple.

A single beam of white light.

-Rumble!

However, the result was anything but simple.

An explosion more extensive than a falling meteor wiped out the monsters.

Lucinil's face drained of color at the sight of the overwhelming destruction.

"Who could have known this would happen with an unknown magic?"

"What on earth…?"

They might have been the inspiration, but they couldn't have possibly predicted that it would be completed in this manner.

The flash of light wasn't a one-time event.

-Flash!

The blue magical star was firing its destructive light not only at the ground but also towards the sky.

"What is that thing, using an unknown destructive magic at that speed?"

"Is anything impossible in magic?"

Antirianus' words were nothing more than a fantasy held by novice mages or those entirely ignorant of magic.

Mages knew all too well what magic could not do. Therefore, the Vampire Lords, who could be considered the oldest mages in the world, knew better than anyone what magic couldn't accomplish.

So Antirianus' statement was nothing more than a malicious joke.

But that joke had become reality.

-Crackling!

The sparks shooting from the magical star intercepted the flying monster swarms and unleashed flashes of light.

It wasn't just that the scale of the large-scale destruction spells had increased more than before; they were also being cast at an immeasurable speed and in countless numbers.

"Living for so long…”

Antirianus smiled.

"You get to see so many things."

Even a lunatic who enjoyed the heat of battle couldn't help but purely admire the miracle achieved by a single star.

The Immortals were gone, but inexplicable things were happening on the battlefield.

Meteors rained down, sweeping away monsters, the Demon King appeared and pushed through the monster waves, and an unidentified giant star provided support fire from the rear.

Not only destruction spells, but a blue barrier also appeared around every charging soldier.

It provided both destruction and protection.

Though they couldn't understand the situation, everyone knew it had appeared to help the allied forces.

The crumbling morale of the allied forces was barely maintained, and even the retreating soldiers began to feel they needed to find their place.

-Roar!

On the other side of the battlefield, a presence that could fully restore the collapsing morale began to reveal itself.

As the space opened up entirely, a massive figure appeared.

Titan…!

The Titan is here!

At the sight of the colossal weapon that could be seen anywhere on the battlefield, despair seemed to disappear, and the entire allied forces began to cheer.

"Ho… The Titan is already being deployed."

At Antirianus's words, Lucinil bit her lip.

"This isn't a good thing."

"I suppose not."

The Titan was originally planned to be summoned after the allied forces had made some progress.

However, it had been deployed earlier than planned out of fear that the allied forces might collapse before even reaching Diane.

Deploying the Titan to boost morale meant that it wouldn't be able to play a significant role when entering the depths of Diane.

"Will it be alright…?"

Adelia asked, to which the Archduke shook his head with a stern expression.

"It probably won't be."

The Titan should have been used later.

However, it couldn't be helped given the situation where, if not used now, the allied forces might destroy themselves.

But when it was truly needed to destroy the warp gates deep within Diane, the Titan would be recalled.

At that moment, when the Titan disappeared, the allied forces' morale might hit rock bottom once again.

Whatever happened, today was the last day.

Whether it would be the destruction of the continent or the end of the monsters.

Everything was at stake in just one day.

The Archduke looked at the blue star floating in the distant sky above the battlefield.

It was a massive miracle with an inexplicable meaning.

A miracle of destruction that shouldn't exist in a time of peace.

Following the Titan and the Immortal, there was now even this.

It was an era where all talents were used only for destruction.

Everyone wished for the end of that era today.

-Kihihihihi!

With the eerie laughter of the phantom horses, the Death Knights' army swept across the battlefield.

Riding the irregularly moving phantom horses, the Death Knights trampled over the monsters as if defying the laws of the world.

The Death Knights and the Death Paladins, who ran wildly, leaping over the giant monsters as if they were mere obstacles, were too fast and unpredictable for the monsters to reach.

It was a terrifying sight to any human, but that terror now belonged to the humans.

And at the very front of them, Olivia Lanze, wielding a massive spear, pierced, smashed, and crushed the monsters.

To save her Tiamata for Reinhardt, who would face the most challenging battle, Olivia didn't use it.

However, for Olivia, who had already mastered the power of the divine, Tiamata's power wasn't that important.

As she swept through the battlefield and raised her hand towards the sky, a vast light poured down from the heavens, enveloping the wide battlefield.

-Oooooh!

The wounds of the injured and the dying began to heal.

The warm divine light itself was a healing light and the source of life.

The power of purity.

Olivia, now more potent than when she was called the Saint of Eredian, scattered healing light across the entire battlefield in an instant, healing everyone.

The dramatic healing was spreading unbelievably far and wide.

To those who experienced this miracle of life, the matters of the Demon King or the Emperor didn't matter.

Such a sacred presence.

Such a beautiful presence.

A being that manifested such a warm light in the world.

The very existence that had chosen to follow her could not possibly be evil, could it?

In fact, wasn't she the very embodiment of purity, a manifestation of the divine within?

However, Olivia Lanze was not interested in the thoughts of such people.

As if to deny the changing thoughts of those people, her right hand, which had been riding the phantom horse through the battlefield, was suddenly filled with dark, murky shadows rather than the power of purity.

Atop the phantom horse, Olivia stood as if performing acrobatics and soon leaped towards the monstrous creature, as tall as a bell tower.

Whoosh!

Compared to the massive creature, the spear in Olivia's right hand was nothing but a toothpick.

Roaaar!

However, the black energy pouring out of the spear exploded like lightning, slashing through the gigantic monster.

Gah…!

As the monster seemed to be about to fall from the single fatal blow, it instead stood up straight.

But the expression in the eyes of the massive monster, which had been spewing flames just moments before, had changed.

It was as if something had contaminated it.

In the depths of the monster's huge pupils, a dark, murky darkness was smoldering.

Those who had been watching Olivia Lanze's battle finally realized.

The monsters that had been pierced and killed by Olivia Lanze's spear, which had been sprinkling the light of life, were not dying but rising back up.

No, they were rising up despite already being dead.

And they were now charging towards the other monsters.

As if controlled by something, the giant monster turned its body away from the human army and towards the other monsters, spewing forth blazing flames.

She had sprinkled the healing light of life and wielded the corrupting power to control death.

The saintess of life and death.

Olivia Lanze had raised the dead monsters to kill the other monsters.

Climbing back on the phantom horse, Olivia ascended the massive monster's back and made her way to its head.

She didn't stop there.

Rumble!

A giant dragon-shaped monster, which had been spewing flames to burn the allied force, began to dive down, claws bared, towards the head of the monster.

Olivia aimed her spear towards the dragon, from the ground to the sky.

Crash!

With a sound like thunder, the dragon-like body was pierced by the spear she had thrown.

Boom!

The falling dragon crashed into the ground, crushing countless other monsters beneath it.

Olivia, riding the phantom horse, raced towards the dragon pierced by her spear.

The dragon was already dying, but it was forcibly resurrected by the power of corruption.

A smile appeared on the lips of Olivia Lanze as she rode the phantom horse.

"Yes…"

Until now, she had to hide her true self, unable to fully reveal her power.

But now, she had to do everything she could.

"I've always wanted to ride one of those!"

Riding the phantom horse, Olivia had leaped onto the back of the dragon, which was now covered in the power of corruption and rising back to life.

The phantom horse disappeared, and Olivia had gained a new mount.

Whoosh!

With a gust-like flap of its wings and a single leap, the dragon, returned from death,

soared into the sky.

Rooooaaar!

Rumble!

The dragon spewed lightning and flames from its mouth.

Crash! Clang!

And on its back, Olivia Lanze, with the energy of death and healing in both hands, formed the shape of a spear and began to deliver death to the flying monsters.

The flying monsters that fell, dead, began to rise again before hitting the ground and took to the sky once more.

In her right hand, the light of healing.

In her left hand, the spear of death.

The monsters killed by Olivia returned from death to slaughter other monsters, while the humans touched by Olivia's sprinkling healing light came back from the brink of death.

The saintess of life and death.

Everyone on the battlefield could see the light of death and life being cast by Olivia Lanze, now mounted on the dragon.

CHAPTER 661

As fierce battles unfolded in Diane, an equally intense battle was taking place in the underground of the Temple Magic University.

It was just that there was no one to remember this battle.

Undoubtedly, the battle was intense.

However, the intensity wasn't due to Saviolin Turner.

"…”

Saviolin Turner silently watched as the Immortal knights were skewered and killed by aura spear.

She had not moved a single step since the battle began.

All approaching Immortals were intercepted.

"This… monster…”

Christina muttered in a daze, grinding her teeth.

She was unmistakably human.

She wasn't a revived Immortal who had become more powerful, nor did she possess anything beyond a human body.

However, Saviolin Turner, maintaining her initial stance, effortlessly blocked all of the Immortals' assaults.

She hadn't even drawn her sword.

Even among the Grandmasters of the Immortals, who were considered the elite, it was impossible to make Saviolin Turner draw her sword.

It was a battle of thousands against one.

Even if the narrow space didn't allow for thousands to attack simultaneously, how was such a feat possible?

Ellen Artorius at least had the power of the Divine Relics.

However, Saviolin Turner completely blocked the Immortals' assault without any such assistance.

If anything, she was the more unbelievable monster.

The nickname of "the strongest in the continent" was attached to her, but Saviolin Turner's reputation was weaker compared to that title.

Before the Great Demon War, there was the commander of Shanafel and her mentor, Larken Simonstite.

Just before and during the Great Demon War, there was the hero, Ragan Artorius.

Currently, after the Great Demon War, there was Ellen Artorius.

There was always someone mentioned before her.

Only when those individuals disappeared did she briefly become known as the strongest on the continent.

That's why some considered Saviolin Turner to be the strongest of the non-champions before the appearance of the next world's strongest.

However, that was just the opinion of the world.

She was always the second one mentioned, but whether she was truly second or not was unknown to anyone.

Strength wasn't determined by the evaluation of the world.

Strength was just strength.

Only those who saw and experienced it could know how powerful it truly was.

Ellen Artorius was powerful, but it was Saviolin Turner, who had ascended to that realm without even the help of a Divine Relic.

It was Saviolin Turner, who had steadily accumulated strength over a long time and had reached that position, who was the truly magnificent existence.

But that magnificent existence was blocking her path.

A shield that would shatter the spear if she tried to pierce it.

If the battle escalated, the laboratory would be destroyed, and the Immortals would be unable to regenerate. That would be playing into the enemy's hands.

Trying to launch a large-scale offensive to kill Saviolin Turner, only for the entire laboratory to be destroyed.

Saviolin Turner would want that.

'Wait… '

But as her thoughts reached that point, Christina felt puzzled.

Just as Christina had predicted the self-destruction of the Allied Forces and the Demon Army and withdrawn the Immortals, Saviolin Turner likely had the same intention.

The entire laboratory collapsing while attempting to break the unbreakable shield with an all-out assault. She would want that.

'No… That's not it either.'

Saviolin Turner would surely know that Christina wouldn't make such a choice.

Destroying the entire laboratory just to kill one Saviolin Turner was a choice Christina had no reason to make.

Since the battle had started, Saviolin Turner had not moved an inch.

Christina thought it was a display of confidence.

It seemed like a show of strength, as if she could block all the attacks of the Immortals without even moving.

No, that was not just a display. It was an indication that she had no intention of actively attacking the Immortals.

In fact, while Saviolin Turner continued to neutralize the Immortals, she made no move against Christina, nor against the Immortals that did not approach her.

Despite all the Immortals in the laboratory being within range of her magical spear, she did not attack or move against those who did not come within about thirty meters of her.

Though she appeared to be concentrating on defense and maintaining distance, she deliberately refrained from attacking the Immortals.

It was simple.

If she began to attack everything in sight, the Immortals would launch an all-out offensive.

Saviolin Turner knew that facing all the Immortals was an impossible task for her.

That's why she only dealt with the approaching Immortals while maintaining a stalemate.

There was only one reason.

"Was it… to buy time?"

It was because she knew what Christina planned to do when she sent the Immortals back into battle.

It was to prevent the Immortals from being redeployed to hunt down the Demon King and his forces.

That's why Saviolin Turner did not actively attack.

She maintained the stalemate, keeping Christina's Immortals tied to the spot and preventing any choices from being made.

Saviolin Turner had not come here to annihilate the Immortals.

Nor had she come to kill Christina.

She had come only to keep the Immortals tied up here.

To prevent the Immortals from returning to Diane.

"Ha, haha… hahaha… All you wanted to do… was that?"

"…"

"Don't you see? You're no different from me."

If the Immortals didn't return, there would be more casualties among the allied forces.

Both Saviolin Turner and the Emperor had decided to allow the deaths of others in the hope that the Demon King would not die.

With a sneer at how they were no different from herself, Christina listened as Saviolin Turner spoke softly.

"That's how it is."

"…What?"

With a stern expression, Saviolin Turner gazed at the alchemist who had gone mad amid the frenzy and despair of war and spoke softly.

"Killing the citizens of the empire while claiming to protect it."

"Killing people who are just like them, only with different appearances, while claiming to protect others."

"Only killing and destroying in the name of standing for something and protecting it."

"Claiming to do it for everyone, but in the end, not being able to help anyone."

"Forgetting the original purpose and intent, and in the end, going down a path that is

no longer the right way, even though they know it, simply because they can't let go of the path they've walked."

"That's how it is."

Saviolin Turner had walked that path.

For a long time, as the sword of the empire, she had killed anything and everything.

She had killed more humans than demons.

It was uncertain whether her actions had truly protected anything. She might have had to kill, or there might not have been a need to kill at all.

There had simply been countless slaughters.

"And so, the Gate incident, as difficult as it was, was a clean war."

"Monsters were evil."

"There was no room for dialogue."

"And so, killing them was the right path."

There was no reason to hesitate in a fight against an enemy that could not be compromised with or was impossible to negotiate with. Therefore, the Gate incident was a war where there was no reason to question the slaughter itself, regardless of the war's difficulty.

But now, Saviolin Turner found herself in a place where such an absolute line did not exist.

She was in a place related to people, not monsters.

Whether her actions were to protect something,

Or to destroy something, she could not tell.

She was there to carry out his orders.

"Yes, that's how it is. When it comes to protecting something, eventually even that reason for protection is lost."

At the end of orders and commands,

Saviolin Turner was no longer there to protect the empire.

She merely stood there as the last sword of the crumbling empire.

"Like how you, who wanted to bring your dead friend back to life, ended up driving your other friends to death."

"…"

At Saviolin Turner's pointed remark, Christina bit her lip and glared at her.

She had wanted to bring her dead friend back to life.

But the truth she learned during that process taught her that her anger should be directed at everyone.

She had dreamt of revenge.

But Christina, by withdrawing the Immortals and leaving her friends in a life-or-death situation within the Allied Forces, had caused countless deaths. Not only would many people die because of Christina's actions, but her friends could die as well.

Of course, Christina knew that too.

Saviolin Turner had merely spoken a fact that Christina was already aware of.

"Christina."

"…"

"Do you still want to bring your dead friend back to life?"

She thought there was a way to do it.

The Immortal was only a half-hearted resurrection.

If she could find a more complete, more perfect method,

She believed she could achieve a true resurrection.

Had that thought changed by now?

"I can do it."

She still believed it was possible to find a way, even if she hadn't found it yet.

Christina thought that way.

There must be a way.

It wasn't impossible, she thought.

But Christina understood Saviolin Turner's words correctly.

She didn't ask if she could do it.

She asked if she wanted to.

"But I no longer have the right to do so."

Even if there was a way, she had no right to bring Asher back to life.

The moment she drove countless people, including her friends, to death in the name of revenge, she lost any reason or right to search for a way to bring her dead friend back to life.

She didn't have the right to try and reclaim what she had lost after throwing even the remaining people into the fire.

That's how it was.

The original intentions and thoughts,

What seemed like the cause,

Ultimately became meaningless.

Asher's body was in a pod somewhere in this laboratory, but Christina hadn't gone there in a while.

There was too much work to do.

Thinking that she would deal with it after everything was over.

In the end, the things she originally planned to do, the dreams she once had, had disappeared.

"Do you think I didn't know that I would end up becoming this kind of person?"

Saviolin Turner's words were ultimately something that even Christina knew.

She had not been ignorant.

She knew that everything would come to this, and that the thought of saving Asher would eventually fade from her mind.

Once she had decided to dream of revenge, she knew it would all flow like this, with the whole world as her target.

Christina had the most powerful army at her command, but in reality, she had to face her greatest enemies.

The Empire.

The Demon King.

The Hero.

In a way, these enemies were even more dangerous and formidable than the Gate Incident itself.

After all, taking revenge against the whole world wouldn't be easy. That's why such extreme measures were necessary, and the opposition was responding in kind.

The Gate Incident would come to a safe end.

The Empire would disappear.

The Demon King would dominate the entire world.

That was the conspiracy the whole world was plotting.

Those who sought to thwart the truth of the Gate Incident with lies and deception would once again attempt to wrap the world in lies and deception.

No complex thoughts were necessary.

Christina would kill all those who tied the knots of lies and deception.

Not for someone else.

For no one else, as words like "for a friend" had all become meaningless.

In the end, for the smallest unit.

For herself.

She would take revenge.

She wished for destruction upon everyone.

"She wants to buy time."

The space was narrow, and since it was difficult to attack, Saviolin Turner could hold out. Someday, her stamina would run out and she would collapse, but her role was to prevent the Immortals from returning.

However, Saviolin Turner's actions had a significant weakness.

"What if we do this…?"

As Christina signaled, the Immortals surrounding Saviolin Turner began to retreat one by one.

Instead, they cleared a path.

"…"

Saviolin Turner watched the scene with a stern expression.

As if to keep an eye on the situation, she surrounded herself with a multitude of Aura blades.

But the Immortals no longer charged or attacked.

-In a flash!

Rather, they disappeared one by one.

With a hardened expression, Saviolin Turner watched as Christina began to laugh.

The Immortals vanished somewhere along with the flash.

Surely, the Immortals were returning to the battlefield.

If they returned to the battlefield to hunt monsters and the Demon King's forces revealed themselves, they would hunt them as well.

Saviolin Turner had no choice but to watch.

She had no way of stopping their movement.

"Why should I deal with you?"

In an instant, all the Immortal forces had disappeared, and the research facility grew cold again.

If Saviolin Turner charged, Christina could do nothing.

"Look."

But, in the first place, there was no need for forces to protect Christina.

"After all, even without the Immortals, you can't kill me, can you?"

If Christina were killed, the Immortals would go berserk.

They would not only hunt the Demon King and monsters but also indiscriminately attack the allied forces.

However, Christina couldn't help but feel a sense of unease in Saviolin Turner's expression.

She was neither flustered nor surprised.

She slowly walked towards Christina.

In a situation where no one could protect Christina.

-Step by step

Slowly.

But as Christina's eyes widened at the sight of Saviolin Turner approaching with certainty.

She merely walked forward, not uttering a single word.

"Surely, surely not…"

Stumbling backward, Christina continued to retreat. She couldn't read any intentions from Saviolin Turner's expression.

"You know what will happen… if you kill me, right?"

Naturally, she couldn't help but be terrified.

She knew her opponent's intentions and desires, so she understood what choice she should make.

People would try to protect her, so she believed they would never kill her.

But as the stony-faced Turner approached, a myriad of possibilities raced through Christina's mind.

There were people who had gone mad.

Was there any rule that said Saviolin Turner couldn't be one of them?

Exhausted by hatred and malice, she might just twist Christina's neck without a second thought, right?

In the end, Christina collapsed in the very spot she had been retreating to.

Christina knew nothing of fighting.

She had sent away all the Immortals.

She had never been slapped in the face, not even once.

She had brazenly talked big in front of a being with the status of a Grandmaster.

"Don't, don't come closer…"

Looking at Christina, who was terrified even though she hadn't been exposed to any violence, Saviolin Turner, now close by, gazed down at her.

It was neither a sneer nor a look of contempt.

Saviolin Turner's clenched eyes were filled with sadness.

"How could someone like you… someone like… someone like you…"

"…"

"Have to end up like this…"

She had shouted confidently from afar, but the moment the being who might kill her came close, she collapsed in fear.

Once the thought of possibly dying crossed her mind, she began to tremble.

Such a pitiful and wretched existence, dwarfed by the fear of death. She had dreamed of an overly grand revenge.

Saviolin Turner could only find the wretchedness of Christina, who cowered and looked up at her, unbearably sad.

She was neither the villain of the century nor an immortal absolute being.

Just a slightly intelligent alchemist.

Saviolin Turner, suppressing her sadness, reached for Christina's collar.

However, before she could grab it, Christina thrust her hand into her pocket.

"I told you not to come!"

In Christina's hand, pulled from her pocket, was a teleportation scroll.

Flash!

Along with a flash of light, Christina, Anna, and Louis Ancton disappeared.

Christina might be small and insignificant, but her life was far from worthless.

She knew better than anyone what would happen if she died.

She acted as if she would die if they tried to kill her, but when death approached, she ran away.

Turner looked around the now empty laboratory, left alone in an instant.

Christina had fled.

But Saviolin Turner was curious.

Had Christina run away out of fear of death, or had she fled because of what would happen if she died?

Regardless, it was in the past.

That wasn't Turner's concern.

Saviolin Turner's original goal was not to kill Christina.

Rather, it was to protect her.

Christina had misunderstood and fled on her own.

A blue curtain of light spread from Saviolin Turner's body.

And then, Saviolin Turner took something out of her pocket.

A signal-emitting artifact.

Saviolin Turner pressed it.

She was not trying to stall for time.

Rather, she had known all along that this would happen.

She knew that if she pretended to stall for time, Christina would send the Immortals back to the battlefield.

It wasn't to protect the Demon King.

She had left the fight between the Immortals and the Demon King to them, and had come to send the Immortals back to the battlefield.

And the moment it was confirmed that the Immortals had returned to the battlefield…

To blow up the entire laboratory that resurrected the Immortals.

That had been Saviolin Turner's purpose for coming.

Click

Saviolin Turner pressed the button.

There was an explosion.

CHAPTER 662

On the outskirts of the Imperial Capital.

-Flash!

"Gasp… Huh…”

Christina, drenched in cold sweat, found herself in a remote location after using a mass teleport scroll.

She had almost been killed.

Saviolin Turner had tried to kill her without a second thought.

Christina glanced at the unconscious bodies of Louis and Anna, feeling a tightness in her chest.

"Insane…”

She knew she was in over her head, but she never expected Saviolin Turner to take such drastic action.

Did she even think she could handle it?

However, Christina couldn't help but harden her expression.

As someone who had to issue numerous remote commands, Christina was connected to many facilities and immortals.

Among them, there was no response from the laboratory.

Saviolin Turner was not the only one who had lost her mind.

The underground laboratory of the magic university had vanished as soon as she disappeared.

"Could it have been… from the very beginning?"

With a pale face, Christina mumbled to herself.

Once destroyed, the immortals could no longer be repaired.

Without the massive support of the empire, the facilities couldn't even be built.

While the immortals were intact, they were now irreparable once destroyed.

With a hardened expression, Christina stared blankly at her two unconscious friends.

Now, she had to see the end with the remaining immortals.

No matter what happened.

How much time had passed?

"Ugh… Huh…”

"Ugh…”

Christina watched her friends slowly regain consciousness.

"Wha… Where are we?"

Knowing that they would undoubtedly object to her actions, Christina had drugged them to sleep at the laboratory before the battle at Diane began.

However, it was only natural for them to be shocked when they woke up outdoors after falling asleep in the laboratory.

Where should she begin to explain?

Christina bit her lip as she watched her friends slowly get up.

-Rumble

All that remained in the place swept by a dazzling flash of light was a massive crater.

Not only had one of the Temple Magic University's research buildings been blown away, but the surrounding buildings had also collapsed due to the impact of the explosion.

In the middle of the crater, where everything seemed to have evaporated, there was a person at the edge.

Saviolin Turner and the area where she had activated her aura field remained intact as if the explosion hadn't touched it.

'I buried explosives in the underground of the magic university.'

'Explosives…? Are you serious?'

'If the immortals return to the battlefield, detonate it. However, those three must not be killed.'

That was the emperor's order.

'There's no reason for the immortals to exist after this battle anyway.'

The immortals were only needed until today.

Thus, facilities to repair immortals were meaningless after today.

No, not only were they meaningless, but their existence was also dangerous.

The problem that would arise from killing Christina wasn't the same as the problem caused by blowing up the laboratory.

With the explosives Saviolin Turner had planted, they couldn't kill the immortals, and they could have actually responded to the explosion.

That's why the laboratory could only be destroyed once all the immortals were gone.

'But… if it's as His Majesty said, then the immortals… '

'They will try to kill Reinhardt.'

That was undoubtedly what would happen.

The Immortals would hunt monsters once they returned to the battlefield, but if Reinhardt and the Demon King's forces revealed themselves on the battlefield, they would engage in battle with them as well.

The Emperor's response to this concern was simple.

"Reinhardt will have to deal with that."

“…Right."

"Isn't our job already done just by preventing the destroyed Immortals from recovering?"

If Saviolin Turner hadn't come, Christina would have sent the Immortals back to the battlefield anyway.

However, if Saviolin Turner hadn't come, the Demon King's army and the allied forces would have had to fight the recovered Immortals as well.

The Immortals would no longer revive.

From now on, the people on the battlefield would have to resolve the situation.

Saviolin Turner could return to the battlefield and continue to fight.

The Emperor did not issue any further orders.

He told her to live her life as she pleased.

That's why she did not head to the battlefield.

She had not died in the last battle.

She was heading somewhere to do her last task.

Not because of someone else's command.

But to do what she had decided on her own volition.

On the battlefield, countless unpredictable events were bound to occur.

However, in this final battle, the Battle of Diane, there had been an excessive number of unforeseen situations.

The first was the sudden disappearance of the Immortals, who were believed to annihilate the monsters at the vanguard.

The second was the sudden appearance of the Demon King.

The third was the emergence of an unknown magic.

The fourth was the earlier-than-expected deployment of the Titan.

The fifth was the appearance of a brave soldier who simultaneously demonstrated the miracles of both healing and death.

And the sixth.

The Immortals, who had disappeared, suddenly started returning to the battlefield.

It was inexplicable, but the Immortals had disappeared and then returned.

They rejoined the battlefield and continued to annihilate the monsters, advancing relentlessly.

Morale, which had been plummeting, slowly began to rise, and once the Immortals returned, it soared.

The unstoppable advance into Diane had begun.

In the end, neither the soldiers who could only see the monsters in front of them nor those who could observe the entire battlefield could know everything happening on the battlefield.

The Immortals' march tearing through the battlefield seemed to be breaking the waves of monsters.

In reality, however, they were chasing the Demon King who had paved the way beyond.

-Rumble!

The Immortals were not heading to Diane by breaking through the monsters.

They were heading there to kill the Demon King.

-Growl!

However, it was clear that the path was still covered with monsters, so they were undoubtedly making their way through. It was just that their destination was different from their actual goal.

The Demon King had leaped into the midst of the monsters, heading forward, while the Immortals chased after him, killing the monsters. The allied forces advanced along the path the Immortals had cleared.

The Demon King and the hero joined forces to clear a path to Diane.

The Immortals followed them.

Then the allied forces followed the path they had opened. To those who did not know the truth, it appeared that way.

However, for the parties involved, the situation was entirely different.

The Demon King was not breaking through the monsters. He was fleeing from the Immortals.

Harriet and Liana could also see the return of the Immortals from their location.

"The Immortal… has returned?"

And they could see the entire horde converging towards the location of the Demon King.

Though the Immortals clearly killed monsters, they would undoubtedly attack not only the forces of the Demon King, but also Liana and Harriet.

The distance between Reinhardt and Harriet was too great for any assistance to be provided.

Too far away.

Harriet was in the middle of the coalition forces, repelling the waves of encroaching monsters from all directions through the magic star.

Helpless.

And the Immortals increasingly rushed towards the Demon King, prioritizing his death above all else.

Too many.

If things continued like this, even Reinhardt would eventually be overwhelmed.

Too far away, and if they recklessly activated large-scale destructive magic, Reinhardt might be swept away as well.

However, the Immortal mages summoned throughout the battlefield had already begun their magical barrage against Reinhardt.

The Immortal mages didn't care if the other Immortals were caught up in the crossfire.

Not only were the pursuers a problem, but the mages were too.

The best course of action in this situation.

Harriet lifted her head.

All around, the air was filled with explosive sounds, screams, and monstrous roars.

An excessively clear sky.

Harriet's eyes widened.

"Liana! Rain!"

"Rain?"

"We need to make it rain!"

"Understood!"

Without asking for a lengthy explanation, Liana, who had noticed the unusual situation, immediately used her power.

While they couldn't provide much help to the distant Reinhardt, they had to ensure that at least the mages' spells wouldn't reach him properly.

And Olivia Lanze, who was spreading the light of healing across the entire battlefield, was also too conspicuous.

Both Reinhardt and Olivia would be targeted by large-scale magic if things continued like this.

Blocking the mages' line of sight was the only way to secure their safety, even if just a little.

Rumble

In the blink of an eye, the clear sky was shrouded by ominous clouds at an astonishing speed.

Drip, plop

Soon.

Raindrops began to fall, one by one.

Whoosh!

Then, a torrential downpour began.

It was not magical, but it was the most effective way to block their vision.

With this, Reinhardt would hopefully be able to hold out a little longer.

However, the problem was that the pouring rain not only blocked the Immortal's sight but also severely limited everyone else's vision.

There was no issue in discerning friend from foe.

But now, they could no longer tell what was happening deep within the battlefield.

Although this might create an unfavorable situation for the coalition forces, they had to prevent the worst-case scenario of Reinhardt's death.

Whoosh!

Rumble

As the downpour continued, lightning struck from the dark clouds, and meteorites continued to fall.

Hell itself had arrived.

It was a scene that seemed like the end of the world.

But they couldn't stop.

They couldn't focus solely on Reinhardt.

Despite successfully activating powerful magic, it was a spell they were not familiar with.

Harriet concentrated her mind once more, believing that she must do everything she could.

At that moment, Harriet saw something rushing towards them beyond the torrential rain, near the limit of her visibility.

It was not from the direction of the monsters, but a soldier wearing a plated helmet and armor, running towards the coalition forces.

Chills ran down Harriet's entire body.

The Immortal didn't just attack the Demon King.

Rather, with their vision obstructed and unable to pinpoint the Demon King's location, some of the Immortals began to hunt down the visible forces of the Demon King.

Naturally, that would include Harriet and Liana.

There was no time to scream.

As the Immortals' gazes were divided, the burden on Reinhardt, who was being pursued by the most Immortals, would be somewhat alleviated.

"Liana…"

"I see it."

Liana had clearly seen the charge of one of the Immortals.

-Zap!

Dozens of lightning bolts poured down from the sky in an instant, striking the charging Immortal.

-Rumble!

Along with the shockwave that tore through the air due to the explosive lightning, the charging Immortal tumbled across the ground several times like a torrential downpour.

However, it charged again despite being hit with a level of lightning that would have blown apart any ordinary monster or human.

It was the charge of a monster that had reached the Master Class.

Its speed was not that of an ordinary human's full strength, but rather that of a battle horse running with all its might or even more.

-Roar! Roar!

The Immortal charged again, taking Liana's lightning strike. Unbelievably, it deflected the lightning with its sword and kept on running.

It wouldn't fall.

"Huff…!"

-Rumble!

If the attack couldn't be blocked, then press it down by applying pressure to the ground.

However, as if the force pushing down on the ground had no effect, the Immortal only slowed down a bit and continued running without hesitation.

Most knights received anti-magic training.

And the Immortals were war heroes or ancient heroes who had become even stronger after death.

Naturally, those who reached the Master Class possessed an enormous level of anti-magic abilities.

Not only physical strength but also lightning was blocked by their aura armor.

"Oh, no…"

Harriet gaped, watching the Immortal that dodged dangerous magical barrages, deflected lightning, and resisted interfering spells while charging.

It was just one creature.

They couldn't even stop the charge of a single Master Class-level Immortal.

It was a fact that everyone had inadvertently forgotten because the number of Immortals had suddenly surged when they were created.

The Master Class was originally considered a strategic weapon even if there was only one.

The Master Class, equipped with the ultimate anti-magic capabilities to become a strategic weapon, was no exception for Harriet, who had completed the most powerful magic.

If only they were a little more familiar with this magic.

They couldn't stop a single one.

And right now, Reinhardt was being pursued by thousands of such strategic weapons.

Worrying about Reinhardt in this situation was foolish.

They had to survive.

Only by surviving could there be a next time.

Both Liana and Harriet tried their best to stop the Immortal's charge, but it wasn't coming through the monsters; it was leaping over the allied forces.

They might be able to stop it with ground-shattering, destructive magic, but that would also kill a huge number of allied troops.

That's why they couldn't stop a single Immortal.

There were countless ways if they were alone, but the Immortal seemed to use the humans as bait, preventing Harriet from using her powerful magic and continued to charge.

A decisive moment.

In the moment when they thought a decision was needed.

The Immortal soldier, who had been running at a furious speed, raised his sword and thrust his aura blade toward Liana, who stood in front of Harriet.

"Liana…!"

The moment Harriet, who had decided that she couldn't let her die, reached out to cast a spell.

-Whoosh!

Someone flew in from somewhere and fiercely collided with the Immortal's flank.

"Cliffman…?"

Cliffman had appeared, having run from somewhere.

Neither Liana nor Harriet had time to be taken aback.

There was no time for a long conversation.

Liana threw herself toward the fallen Immortal.

And before it could regain its posture, she grabbed its nape.

-Rumble!

Fierce lightning began to pour down on Liana's body from the sky.

The lightning seemed to flow through Liana's body and into the Immortal's flesh.

It was as if she was trying to forcibly insert the lightning.

-Zap!

Harriet had to cast a shock resistance spell on everyone nearby.

-Rumble!

If it wouldn't fall after dozens of lightning strikes, she would shoot hundreds of times.

Beyond the limits of its limits, the Immortal was already convulsing, unable to even stand up.

"Die…!"

-Crack!

With a fierce flash that could no longer be called lightning, the Immortal turned to ashes.

"Huff… Hah…”

A concentrated lightning strike at close range.

Cliffman had created an opening, and Liana had finished it off.

CHAPTER 663

They had nearly failed to suppress a single Immortal Master Class entity.

If it hadn't been for Cliffman's timely arrival, the situation would have been undoubtedly dangerous.

"I had a feeling you were here."

"Thank you, thank you… That was close. Really."

Breathing heavily, soaked from the rain, Cliffman looked at Liana and Harriet.

In the midst of the battlefield, Cliffman, who had been fighting somewhere, saw the lightning striking down in the middle of the allied forces and knew Liana was there.

And he realized that they were about to be attacked by something within the alliance, rather than a monster.

Liana staggered to her feet.

It was just one.

Despite being a Master Class, it was only a single entity among the thousands of Immortals on this battlefield.

Both Harriet and Liana had exhausted tremendous energy trying to stop that one entity.

Even though there was a torrential downpour, many had noticed the numerous lightning strikes and explosions resulting from their tremendous use of power.

Cliffman, who had been somewhere on the battlefield, had seen this and hurried to protect Liana and Harriet.

Naturally, if Cliffman could see it, so could the Immortals.

Liana and Harriet looked around with despairing expressions.

"More are coming…"

They had felt the threat to their lives by just stopping one entity.

But now, Immortals who had pinpointed Harriet and Liana's location were approaching from all over the battlefield within the heavy rain.

This time, it wasn't just one.

Seeing the Immortals approaching from all sides, Harriet clenched her teeth, having struggled to handle even one.

"We might have to move."

"To where?"

At Liana's question, Harriet bit her lip.

This place was a battlefield, and the allied forces were already surrounded by monsters on all sides.

If they were to flee, they'd have to flee completely.

And fleeing completely would mean leaving the Immortals to be dealt with by someone else.

Was survival more important?

Or was it more important to reduce the number of Immortals?

At this critical juncture, Cliffman spoke to Harriet.

"Cast all the enhancement magic you can on me."

"You're going to face them…?"

"Yeah. I'll try to hold them off somehow. If it doesn't seem possible, then run."

Cliffman took a deep breath.

They had to do as much as they could.

They had to hold out to their limits.

That was Cliffman's conclusion, and neither Liana nor Harriet disagreed.

The Magic Star still unleashed a fierce barrage of light against the monsters.

If Liana and Harriet fled from this spot, the number of sacrifices would only increase.

They had to hold on.

It was up to Cliffman to protect the two of them.

The forces of the Demon King were strong, but their numbers were not overwhelming.

And none of the allied forces fighting had an obligation to protect them.

Protecting or killing was up to each individual.

Harriet's protective and enhancement spells coursed through Cliffman's body, invigorating him.

He had escaped from the place where he had to fight.

But how many of them could hold their ground on this battlefield?

It was a battle to protect something.

That's why Cliffman had rushed to protect what he had to.

But did he have the ability to do so?

He didn't know why the Immortals had suddenly disappeared, only to return and try to kill them.

In fact, there was no need to know.

It was natural for Cliffman to stand here, in a battle to protect something, in order to protect what was most precious to him.

"Phew…”

The movements approaching from all over the battlefield, clearly indicating the presence of Immortals, were unmistakable.

The Demon King was being pursued by thousands of Immortals deep within the battlefield.

Everyone was already overwhelmed by the tasks at hand.

There were no reinforcements.

The saving grace was that, except for the Master Class, the mages' attacks were being neutralized by Liana and Harriet's long-range sniping.

The real threat was the Master Class, who charged with overwhelming magic resistance and defensive power.

Liana and Harriet had a significant impact on the entire battlefield. Their deaths would bring about an irreversible, tremendous loss for the entire battle.

Cliffman's best course of action was to deal with the immediate enemies.

The two of them had become far too significant.

Master Class Immortals were approaching from all sides, and he had to protect them despite not being at the Master Class level himself.

Wasn't that too presumptuous?

Wasn't that impossible?

Could someone like him really accomplish such a feat?

But it wasn't because he could that he stood there; it was because he had to.

So, he went for it.

He rushed in before the enemies could reach them.

He hadn't reached the Master Class level.

But at that moment, Cliffman's body was enveloped in a blue magic barrier, and even his sword radiated an ominous aura.

Rumble!

Fierce flames and lightning surged, and the sword glowed with a thick, blue magic light, much like an Aura Blade.

Harriet had cast the most powerful spells she could.

The most powerful mage provided the most significant support.

With this much support, it was possible.

Cliffman thrust his sword at the charging Immortal.

Squelch!

Thud!

The sword should have been deflected or shattered the Immortal's body upon impact.

But the body remained intact, as did the weapon.

It was possible.

While there were limits to his physical abilities, the limitless magic had his back.

Flash!

Liana's powerful lightning strike also provided support.

The distance was too close, and he would inevitably be electrocuted, but Harriet's protective magic prevented the lightning from having a significant impact.

Clang!

"Urgh…!"

Bang!

After repelling the charging Immortal, Cliffman swung his sword wildly, as if he had lost his mind.

His body and mind quickly adapted to the unfamiliar state.

Crack!

He repeatedly struck the Aura Armor on the Immortal's body.

Liana's lightning and Harriet's efforts to restrain the Immortal's legs and create an opportunity for a decisive blow provided support.

Screech!

Finally, the sword penetrated the Immortal's chest, and the powerful Aura enchantment within the sword itself exploded, reducing the Immortal's body to dust.

"Ha… Haa…”

One.

He had defeated one.

With the support of the most powerful magician and the strongest supernatural, Cliffman had succeeded in facing a Master Class being.

However, even after exchanging just a few blows, his body felt as if it was falling apart.

And more approached.

He had barely managed to handle one, but as the battle intensified and became more visible, more Immortals discovered the trio and approached.

Could he do it?

Cliffman wiped the rain from his face and took a deep breath.

Could he do it?

Obsessively gnawing on his thoughts, Cliffman clenched his teeth.

He had never won a battle because he was capable; not even once.

After the Gate Incident, every battle had been like that.

There were countless variables.

More enemies than expected, or unexpected foes.

It had become almost routine for his fellow soldiers to die, and he frequently returned from the battlefield alone, with everyone else dead.

People considered Cliffman strange.

Many had fought alongside him, even those more skilled, but only Cliffman always returned alive from battles where everyone else perished.

And it wasn't cowardice.

He would complete the mission alone and return.

A peculiar power.

Wasn't a talent for combat, in truth, closer to a supernatural ability?

Even his friends started to say so.

But Cliffman didn't deny their opinion.

Instead, he merely thought his talent was closer to luck than supernatural ability.

He had been lucky.

His life had been such that he could only think that way.

Even in battles where Master Class fighters died, Cliffman somehow survived.

The one who found that most bizarre was Cliffman himself.

Eventually, he started to think that he might have survived by sacrificing the lives of others.

He hadn't survived because he was strong.

Hadn't he survived by stealing someone else's luck?

There had been times when he killed the remaining monsters after the most dangerous ones and stronger fighters perished.

That's why Cliffman considered his talent to be in the realm of luck.

He knew better than anyone that he hadn't survived by fighting well or being strong.

And in a battlefield, someone's luck becomes someone else's misfortune.

He had survived through someone's misfortune.

Seeing it with his own eyes and experiencing it countless times, Cliffman had no choice but to be extremely reluctant to fight alongside someone.

If his talent was to achieve victory and survive through others' misfortune…

It was almost a curse.

So, he continued to push himself into harsh battlefields.

He wanted to fight alone in the most dangerous places.

In some sense, it was a defiance towards an unknown someone.

If it was his talent to win in any battle…

Let them see if he could survive again.

Let them see if he could survive even without allies to sacrifice in a dire situation.

In that way…

He had volunteered for suicide-like missions and yet survived in the end.

He wasn't even that strong, but he always won.

He always survived.

But not once had he taken pleasure in that victory.

What he thought was dangerous turned out not to be, and it was just a battle he could easily win.

His luck had followed him in every aspect of those battles.

It was a cursed life of victories and survival.

Cliffman now knew that his talent was not a power for strength, but a power that brought about some coincidence.

A coincidence of survival and return.

Then, because he was here, they might win the battle, but perhaps Liana and Harriet would die.

However, he couldn't not come.

He couldn't choose to keep his distance, thinking that his presence might cause their deaths.

He looked at the approaching Immortals throughout the battlefield.

Now, he was not alone.

So, he had to fight to protect them.

That's why Cliffman prayed.

His body had been strengthened through immense supportive magic, enough to face a master class.

But in the end, he had to be strong.

He had no choice but to be strong.

If he didn't surpass his limits, he would only fall.

So.

At least for today.

For just this one day.

The talent that had only guaranteed survival and living.

This time, he hoped it would grant him strength.

Dodging the enemy's sword by chance, someone else taking the hit instead of him.

He didn't need such cursed luck anymore.

A sword that could pierce through enemies.

And manifesting as a shield that could protect his friends.

So.

The talent called battle.

He wished for its direction to change now.

The countless protective and enhancing magics that Harriet had cast upon him.

Whether it was the effect of stabilization magic that acted upon his mind, he didn't know.

Or perhaps, his damned talent had responded to his desire.

Regardless, in the face of the impending crisis, Cliffman's mind became incredibly calm.

"Huuu…”

As Cliffman steadied his breathing, the boiling magical power within him soon stabilized.

And the magical power gathered in his hand holding the sword gradually flowed along the blade.

"You…”

Liana stared at Cliffman's transformation with wide eyes.

He couldn't hear her.

He could only hope.

He could only wish.

Hadn't he already had enough coincidences and luck?

Wasn't it time for that to bear fruit?

How much longer must he rely on absurd luck to scrape by with a miserable life?

A life built on coincidences is still a life.

A life gained through luck is still a life.

There was no doubt that he had accumulated experiences over time.

Coincidences eventually pile up and become something that can no longer be called a coincidence.

When luck continues, the experiences gained from that luck must eventually create something.

Even if it had been cursed misfortune up until now, it undoubtedly remained in the

form of combat experience, and Cliffman himself had carried out those battles.

Never.

No one else had fought in his place.

The experience of those moments had definitely accumulated.

The lucky experiences gained at the cost of the blood of comrades and colleagues who had stood on the battlefield together had definitely piled up in the form of combat experience.

Overflowing.

Cliffman's body disappeared in an instant.

And then.

Swoosh!

The Immortal that charged to a close distance was cut in half with a single strike.

A sudden awakening.

“…What?"

"What, what is it?"

Harriet and Liana, who had seen his transformation, were rather flustered.

Cliffman rushed towards the Immortal that was charging directly at Liana and Harriet and swung his sword.

His body had surpassed its limits, and the most powerful mage in the world had cast immense enhancement magic upon him.

The only thing lacking was himself.

Now that this insufficiency was filled, it was only natural that the Immortal wouldn't notice Cliffman's approach.

No.

At this stage, Cliffman might not even need Harriet's help anymore.

-Clang! Crash! Clash!

After three swift sword clashes, Cliffman's sword pierced through the Immortal's neck as it found an opening in its chest armor.

Cliffman neither gasped in surprise nor marveled at his own feat.

With endlessly calm and cold eyes, he assessed his next target and immediately moved.

Although he had surpassed his limits, he hadn't merely opened the path to becoming a master class.

Cliffman's transformation was a bit different.

In the end.

The cursed luck that had always been with him was meant for this very moment.

By luck, by chance, he had survived.

Now, there was no longer any need for it.

No more need for chance, fortune, or luck.

Through the experiences built upon them.

The things accumulated by chance and luck had already reached a critical point.

From then on, at the end of coincidences that forced survival.

At the end of accumulated experiences.

It was only natural to become a being whose victory was inevitable.

Thus, reaching the state where there was no longer any need for luck, fortune, or

chance for survival, rejuvenation, and victory.

Reaching a destiny where victory was the only possible outcome.

That is why it was inherently a growing talent, straddling the boundary of superpowers and destiny.

So. The bloody fate built upon countless sacrifices and deaths.

The talent called battle.

It had just been completed.

"Shaaaaa!"

The sudden downpour must have been due to Liana's power.

He understood the intention.

Indeed, the mages' barrage had become very inaccurate.

However, the immortals within sight relentlessly pursued him.

"Kugugung!"

"Uh… ugh!"

With the Flames of Tuesday, Tiamata, and Alsbringer, he pushed through the monstrous waves.

Although torrential rain fell, the Fire of Tuesday explosively evaporated the rainwater, turning it into steam that obscured the pursuers' vision. In that sense, it was rather helpful.

His focus was more on moving forward than killing the monsters.

There was no other way to describe the situation except as absurd.

The disappearance of the immortals.

It was hard to accept, but he knew what the situation was leading to.

That's why he knew that the moment he revealed himself, such a situation would soon follow.

The immortals returned and pursued him.

If the immortals succeeded in killing him, they would now try to kill Olivia, Harriet, and Liana, and hunt down the vampire lords.

His death would be the beginning.

If he died, the immortals would try to find those who followed him.

So he couldn't die.

In a way, the situation wasn't all bad.

The immortals followed him.

"Kwooaaar!"

"Whew!"

"Thud!"

All he had to do was keep moving forward.

The immortals followed he, breaking through the waves of monsters.

Monsters in front.

Immortals behind.

Was this what it was like?

He was actually doing something that seemed ridiculous, like fleeing towards the enemy lines.

Should he call it an assault-like retreat?

Rather, he didn't need to worry about attacking, he just had to step on and kick the monsters aside while moving forward.

The immortals would sweep them all away.

"I'm, here, you, sons of bitches!"

Instead, he strained himself, swinging the Flames of Tuesday and Tiamata's radiance.

While doing so, he evaporated the puddles of water with his flames, blocking their vision.

Should he call it a decoy tactic?

It was a good situation for him, whether the monsters died or the immortals were destroyed.

As long as he wasn't caught.

The moment he was caught, he would be surrounded by thousands of immortals, and there was no cunning way to survive in that situation.

While running, he had no choice but to look back to see how far the pursuers had reached, as he stepped over and evaded the monsters trying to grab and tear him apart.

Throughout his life, he had seen countless terrifying scenes, and after the Gate Incident, he had faced countless horrifying sights.

By mere appearance alone, there had been countless hideously grotesque monsters.

"Insane…"

However, he had never felt 'fear' as intensely as he did in that moment.

The torrential downpour and the waves of monsters could not stop them.

Clad in blue aura armor and wielding weapons like spears, axes, and swords, each

adorned with aura blades, about a thousand Master Class warriors pursued him with single-minded determination.

Some broke through the monsters, killing them in their path, while others, like him, leaped over the monsters and charged forward.

The Master Class warriors were beings who had reached the peak among superhumans.

These beings, numbering in the thousands, furiously pursued him with the intent to kill.

Sure, the grotesque monsters were disgusting and terrifying.

However, those who could literally crush and shred the terrifying monsters, leaping tens of meters in a single bound, were coming after him.

And they were not just a few hundred, but thousands.

Kwoooo!

Monsters were shattered by the aura shockwave, not even from being hit by a weapon, but merely from the impact of their bodies.

They swarmed in droves.

There was no option to confront them.

He ran.

He had to, in order to survive.

It was the only thing to do if he wanted to live.

But, very regrettably,

Sssssss!

Kukkak!

"Ugh… ugh!"

The Immortals also had a large number of Archmages capable of long-range support.

They blanketed the area above where he was running with large-scale destructive magic.

That way, the monsters would die, and he would die along with them.

Since they couldn't properly locate him due to the rain, they indiscriminately unleashed large-scale destructive magic.

Ice spears, lightning bolts, and sudden explosions.

And then,

Plop!

"Damn it…!"

Suddenly, the ground turned into a swamp.

Thousands of Swordmasters followed me, and the blinded by the rain Archmages rained destructive magic upon him.

As if it didn't matter if the Immortals were swept away.

Gururururu!

"Ugh!"

He grabbed onto the horns of a sinking monster, stood up, and continued forward, trampling over the floundering monsters in the swamp.

Perhaps that was even better.

"Damn it!"

But they leaped after him, trampling over the other sinking Immortals in the swamp.

Those who sank also managed to struggle and escape.

If any of them touched him, it would be the end in an instant.

The Immortals were scarier than the monsters.

Kukkak!

"Kuh… ugh!"

Direct destructive magic struck his head as well.

Thanks to the aura armor and magic resistance protection, it couldn't be a fatal blow.

The magic that struck him was powerful enough to kill an ordinary person hundreds of times over.

At that moment, when he thought he might be caught by the Immortals due to the interference of the magic,

Kwooooooo!

With a deafening roar that tore through the sky, a breath of fire and lightning struck the Immortals chasing him from behind, and for a moment, a gap was created between him and the Immortals.

Gururururung!

With a speed similar to crashing down to the ground, a massive body landed right in front of my eyes.

A distinct golden figure could be seen atop the massive creature.

“Reinhardt! Get on!”

Olivia, who had mounted the dragon, gestured to him.

Had she come to save him?

Was that dragon?

He was so disoriented that he couldn't grasp what was happening on the battlefield.

The result was clear: Olivia had ridden a dragon to save him.

But the answer was predetermined.

"No! Go!"

What?!

"Go quickly! I have to stay here!"

His role was to lure the Immortals while destroying Diane.

If he were to flee, the Immortals would instead attack others.

And they might already be under attack.

He couldn't forget the worth of his ability to lure the Immortals.

The quicker he took risks, the sooner the war would end.

So he couldn't leave.

If he hesitated any longer, the Immortals would attack not only him but also Olivia.

Then, both of them would die.

He alone would bear the risk.

"Just go!"

At my shout, Olivia hesitated no longer.

“You…! You idiot…!”

Olivia gritted her teeth and yelled.

“Don't die, you fool!”

Kugugung!

The dragon, which had appeared before him, leaped roughly and soared back into the pouring rain.

It was clear that everyone was doing more than their fair share.

So, like them, he had to do more than he was capable of.

Once again, in the place where lightning and fire had swept through.

He simply ran.

Luring the Immortals.

Toward Diane, the core of this battlefield.

CHAPTER 664

The enemy of my enemy is my ally.

At that moment, I was putting this saying into practice, but the biggest problem was that my enemies were closing in on me from both the front and the rear.

The moment I faltered on the tightrope, I would be devoured by both enemies at once.

It was a bizarre sight, as if I was doing a weightlifting act on the front line, but ironically, I wasn't in the deepest part of the battlefield.

The heavy rain made it hard to see, but I could spot the flashes of the Void Sword's trajectory from a distance, and I saw the corpses of the monsters cut down in one blow here and there.

Ellen, who had jumped into the battlefield from the beginning, was far ahead of me.

She had already entered the midst of the battle, cleaving through the waves of monsters with the Void Sword and Lapelt, completely obliterating them.

Ellen, who had recklessly plunged into those depths without a single escort, was indeed reckless, but she had Lapelt and Lament to back her up.

In contrast, I was in greater danger with the Immortals attached to my tail.

As I delved deeper into the heart of the battle, not only did the number of monsters increase, but it became increasingly difficult to choose between breaking through the Immortal behind me or the monsters in front of me.

Ironically, I was able to get this far because of the concentrated fire aimed at me.

Thousands of archmages were still unleashing massive spells above my head, just to kill me.

-Kwakwakwang!

However, because they couldn't properly secure their line of sight, the destructive magic was sweeping away the monsters blocking my path.

-Kurrrung

-Syaaaah!

The magic that was trying to kill me was killing the monsters that were trying to kill me as well.

Flashes of indistinguishable magic, explosions, cold and fire, and lightning.

It was an immense relief that no spell managed to bind my feet, whether it was because they couldn't see me or due to my magic resistance power, but they didn't directly affect me.

I was a walking, indiscriminate bombardment zone, so I actually had to move forward, pushing through the flames and heavy rain.

While Ellen trusted the Void Sword and Lapelt to lead her forward, the attacks that sought to kill me ironically became the spearhead of my advance.

That being said, I couldn't afford to slow down.

If I didn't run, the Immortals would catch up to me.

Due to the rough pursuit of the Immortals and my breakthrough, the Allied forces were quickly advancing towards the heart of the battle.

I already had the locations of the Warp Gates in my head, even though the visibility was low.

All I had to do was lead the Immortal towards the direction of the Warp Gates and keep running.

Although it seemed simple at a glance, I had to run through the most dangerous areas of the battlefield without being caught by the enemy.

Something was protecting me, but there was no telling how long it would last.

-Grooooaar!

And then, I saw a massive explosion of fire erupting in one area of the battlefield.

"What… is that?"

An explosion occurred in the distance.

The sheer amount of raindrops that were instantly pushed away allowed me to see the spectacle.

The raindrops displaced by the massive explosion soon turned into steam and soared into the sky.

The shockwave of fire that erupted from Lapelt crushed the monsters, and I could see the darkness flowing from the Void Sword accurately bisecting the Warp Gate.

In an instant, one of the Warp Gates in the heart of Diane was destroyed effortlessly, and the origin of the monsters had been reduced to an empty plot.

Ellen was doing on her own what I intended to do with the Immortals.

I knew Ellen was strong, and having awakened two divine artifacts, she was even stronger.

But in the final battle, could she really do that alone, without the knights of Shanafel that she usually brought along?

I had heard that Ellen had grown stronger since her condition became irreversible, but I didn't realize she was this powerful.

Like a ghost rampaging through the battlefield, Ellen destroyed a warp gate and disappeared into the downpour once more.

If I encountered Ellen in her current state, would she attack me first or deal with the monsters?

I couldn't be sure.

But it was dangerous to get too close to Ellen.

And the Immortal might even attack Ellen instead.

While pondering these thoughts, I started running in a direction opposite to Ellen's.

-Kurruring!

In another location, a strange black energy surged.

As with Ellen, me, and the Immortals, it was close to the heart of the battlefield.

I wasn't sure if the expression "darkness burns" was truly accurate, but the burning shape of darkness was undoubtedly sweeping through the monsters in Diane's core.

It wasn't just me at the vanguard; the allied forces had multiple fronts.

Something penetrated one of the fronts and the allied forces followed suit.

It didn't take long to figure it out.

It was definitely Ludwig.

I didn't know the limits of the power he gained through dark magic.

However, like me and Ellen, he was at the forefront of the battle.

Regardless of his thoughts, unlike Christina, I could feel a firm resolve in Ludwig's steps.

A strong determination to end all of this somehow.

There was a warp gate in Ludwig's direction as well.

And, like how I could see Ludwig through the downpour, he was dangerously close to me.

I had to avoid him.

Just as encountering Ellen on the battlefield was dangerous, so too was encountering Ludwig.

Everything else could wait.

Destroying Diane's gate was the priority.

-Kurruring!

With every swing of Ludwig's greatsword, the dark magic energy created a path by crushing the monsters.

The ominous aura emanating from Ludwig's form reminded me of a berserker. The allied forces advancing in the wake of Ludwig's opened path must have been equally frightened by the sight of the berserker wielding such sinister power.

I couldn't see every part of the battlefield due to the heavy rain.

Even if it wasn't raining, there wouldn't be time for that.

-Kwakakak!

I leaped over a monster that caused the ground to tremble and finished it off.

-Kwang! Kwarung!

Finally, I arrived at the warp gate while avoiding the monsters and the Immortal.

It was medium-sized.

Monsters were pouring out of the crimson dimensional hole.

It seemed as if it was the end, with monsters pouring out like water gushing.

I didn't need to deal with the monsters myself.

-Kurruring!

The destructive forces targeting me shattered, ripped, and burned the encircling monsters.

It felt as if I had become a god of destruction.

As various types of destructive magic rained down upon my location, it was as if I was deliberately wielding such power.

I achieved my goal using the power of those who sought to kill me.

It was quite amusing, yet a plausible situation.

The battlefield was chaotic and brutal, but all I needed was to achieve my objective.

To survive.

To do so, I had to destroy the warp gates.

"Ugh… hah!"

Vrooooom!

As if a whirlwind was condensing, the power of destruction and corruption gathered in Tiamata, which had turned into a demon sword.

The maximum aura.

And holding Tiamata, imbued with the maximum power of destruction, I ran between the monsters that were being pulverized by the barrage of destructive spells.

I thrust it into the maw of the dimension that spewed out the monsters.

Kwa-d-d-d-d!

I could clearly see the warp gate being destroyed as soon as the power was released.

I may not be able to cut it in one stroke like Ellen, but I could still destroy the warp gate with my power.

Vroooom

I couldn't be sure that the Immortals wouldn't ignore the gate and chase after me, so I destroyed the gate with my own strength.

However, as one warp gate disappeared, the Immortals pursuing me became faster.

There was no time to rest.

"Damn it…!"

No matter how helpful the Immortals' attacks were, the fact that they were trying to kill me remained unchanged.

I ran, and I ran again.

It felt like a game of tag where everyone around me was trying to catch me.

I didn't know how long I had been running.

There were so many spells and monsters altering the surrounding environment that I couldn't rely on my barrier alone.

I ran away, I ran away, and I ran away again until I reached the warp gate, which I then destroyed. And I ran away once more.

I had no idea how much time had passed.

As the warp gates were destroyed, the number of monsters decreased, and the allied forces had already entered Diane.

The Immortals were still chasing me, just out of reach, while slaughtering the monsters of Diane.

Ellen, acting alone, and I, luring the Immortals, destroyed the warp gates one by one.

And the allied forces that had reached Diane were also destroying the gates one at a time.

My heart raced like mad.

It wasn't because of the fear of the Immortals catching up to me.

It was truly.

It was really the end.

We were almost there.

Somewhere, I heard the sound of phantom horses galloping as if in a hallucination, and I saw the sight of massive monsters crashing down and crushing the armies.

The warp gates of Diane were shattered one by one.

The moment when I could talk about what happened next.

What should I do next?

Would there be a time when I could talk about such things?

So.

The allied forces that had reached Diane were on the verge of destroying the last gate, which was everyone's ultimate goal.

As the number of warp gates decreased, the number of monsters pouring out from a single gate increased.

However, the total number of monsters had to decrease as the number of gates decreased.

The allied forces had gone beyond being surrounded by monsters and had now encircled Diane, dealing with even the monsters on the outskirts.

The number of monsters had decreased significantly.

So.

The number of monsters blocking the Immortals also dwindled.

As I approached the end of this task, my life hung in the balance.

The moment I began to consider how to deal with the Immortals after enduring this long, I saw something in the distance amidst the downpour.

"Ah…"

I knew what that phenomenon was.

They had destroyed warp gates all over the battlefield.

Now, there was only one left.

No, it was already over.

Only a single warp gate remained.

Then, when that happened…

The gate crisis would end.

Although the gate crisis would be over, they still had to face what came out of it.

Rumble!

The last remaining gate ceased to spew monsters and instead grew larger.

The red hole of the warp gate, now hovering in the sky, expanded like a burning sun.

From there, something appeared.

No.

It poured out.

Thud!

A massive creature fell to the ground from the red hole of the warp gate, which had swelled to its limit.

As the last warp gate remained, after spewing the final monster, the gate vanished.

There had been many monsters in the form of dragons, but none were as massive or as alien as this one.

The final calamity.

A grotesque dragon with a body resembling the projected night sky, adorned with six pairs of enormous wings.

In the original work, it was merely referred to as the final monster, without even a name, but I called it the Dragon from Another World.

It was so massive that, even in the pouring rain, its overwhelming presence could be seen from anywhere.

Roar!

Rumble!

With a deafening sound that could shatter the world,

The Dragon from Another World roared.

Now, the gate crisis was over.

If they could somehow deal with the Dragon from Another World, they could all move on to the next matters.

The Dragon from Another World opened its maw towards the world.

And then.

Whoosh!

From its gaping maw, it unleashed a void.

There was no explosion.

Simply, as the void passed by,

The world was erased.

The unexpected appearance of the final monster.

The irrational violence it unleashed left the battlefield feeling cold.

Hiss

In the midst of the downpour, everyone could see the alien, pitch-black mass from afar.

The sudden appearance of the grotesque mass.

And the pitch-black breath that wiped away everything it touched.

Whoosh! Thud!

With each breath the mass released from its gaping maw, there was no impact, no explosion, no blast.

Things simply vanished.

"What is… What is that…?"

Harriet, at the rear of the battlefield, stared in horror at the irrational destruction caused by the sudden appearance of something.

Cliffman, who had just finished off the last Immortal around them, and Liana were no different.

Many mages were already hurling magic at the dangerous-looking figure.

But their attacks passed through it.

Lightning, fire, and explosions.

It was as if they could not even reach the night-like figure.

The flashes from the magic spells could not reach it either, they simply pierced through it and exploded behind it.

It had form, but not substance.

Perhaps it was an ethereal enemy.

That's why Harriet unleashed a powerful light imbued with the power of exorcism, but even that merely passed through it.

Though they couldn't see it clearly, it was a monster using a power completely different from any they had faced before.

"What… is it?"

Monsters were diverse.

There were monsters immune to fire, and monsters immune to magic.

But this one exhaled a breath that erased everything it touched and effortlessly deflected all attacks.

As if it existed in a place unrelated to the principles of the world.

Harriet widened her field of vision to observe the creature more closely.

Even upon closer inspection, its form was incomprehensible.

And she clearly saw it repelling all the magic being cast upon it.

The projection from the otherworldly dragon's body was similar to the projection of the void sword held by Ellen.

If the void sword Lament could sever everything it touched with its blade of night.

Then that creature could do what the void sword Lament did on a larger scale.

That was why Harriet had no choice but to realize what power Ellen's sword possessed in reverse.

The void sword didn't merely cut everything it touched.

It erased everything it touched.

They had merely mistaken the thinly spread void blade for cutting things away.

That creature could realize what the void sword did by spewing its breath.

A dragon with the form of the night.

Therefore, it was untouchable by the principles that existed in the world.

But it could destroy the world.

How could something like that exist?

How were they supposed to kill it?

The moment Cliffman awoke to the path of the Master Class and overcame the crisis of the Immortals' assault, that creature appeared.

It felt as if, at the very last moment, all that they had done had been rendered meaningless.

As if it had appeared to mock the entire world.

-Zzzzzzap!

Then, in front of the creature, a crack in space formed, revealing another massive figure.

A titan, a colossal weapon that could rival the size of the overwhelming dragon.

In the brief moment it had left the battlefield and recharged minimally, the titan appeared, ready to do anything to stand against despair.

-Hwoong!

This time, the creature swung its tail instead of its breath.

And the titan's waist vanished.

Not destroyed, but the part of its trajectory where the dragon's tail touched disappeared.

The morale that had been holding the allied forces together up to this point

crumbled as the titan fell apart.

Even though not everyone could properly see the spectacle, they could hear the titan collapsing and feel the vibrations.

That tremendous tremor was the despair felt by all the members of the allied forces.

"How… what… how are we supposed to…?"

The Immortals had disappeared.

And reappeared.

The titan had been deployed.

What difference did it make in the end?

With a creature like that appearing at the very last moment.

What were they supposed to do?

Were all these events.

In truth.

Unending?

Liana and Harriet both felt a sense of emptiness beyond despair.

-Swoooosh!

Rain continued to fall.

CHAPTER 665

The Titan had fallen.

And with one breath, a part of Diane was wiped away.

I knew it.

Attacks with weapons other than relics would not be effective.

In the original story, only Ellen and Ludwig could fight the dragon. The others had to leave the dragon to them and exterminate the other monsters.

The others couldn't even attack it in the first place.

Back then, Ellen didn't have the Sun's Cloak, and Lament wasn't a Void Sword.

In the end, no one could match it.

Ludwig used the Alsbringer to summon a divine incarnation and faced the dragon in mutual destruction.

I had entertained the idea.

The situation was much different from the original story. So, new events could unfold due to the different circumstances.

Ellen's Lament transforming and obtaining the Sun's Cloak were situations that didn't exist in the original story.

So, I thought that perhaps we could confront the Void Dragon in a different way than in the original story.

I thought that perhaps we could overcome this final situation without using Alsbringer.

But it was a foolish thought.

The moment I saw a part of the army erased by a single breath, other possibilities vanished from my mind.

We could fight.

Surely, Ellen and I could fight it.

But even if we could kill it without using Alsbringer, there would be nothing left afterward.

-Roar!

It was an overwhelming violence.

A dragon from another world.

This situation was the last injustice I had to face.

Suffering from the unfairness I had created.

Paying the price myself.

What needed to be done had been decided from the start.

Killing that final monster on this spot using Alsbringer.

From the moment Alsbringer was in my hand, that was my fate.

Some doubts lingered in my mind, but now wasn't the time to think about them.

If it had to be done, it had to be done.

That's how it had been so far.

The only difference was that what needed to be done now was the last thing to be done.

Everything I had done to survive, because I didn't want to die, had vanished.

When the violence I had described in writing became reality and confronted me, all

other thoughts disappeared.

But still, the Immortals were chasing me from behind.

All the warp gates were gone.

There were still a huge number of monsters that had already been expelled, but no more monsters appeared.

All I had to do was deal with that dragon.

I looked back.

The Immortal's army, which had suffered tremendous losses but was still powerful and trying to kill me, followed me.

I was annoyed by what was behind me.

It wouldn't matter if that thing followed me, but it was time to finish it off as well.

The Immortal wouldn't be of any help in fighting that thing.

The remaining monsters could be dealt with by the Allied Forces alone.

So now, the Immortal was just a threat.

So, there was no need to run anymore.

No one had to risk their lives to face the Immortal.

"Now…"

I pulled something out from my belongings.

-Click

As soon as I pressed the button on the artifact.

-Pop!

Two people appeared before my eyes.

"We don't need the Immortal anymore."

And in an instant.

The Immortals who had been slaughtering monsters and following me all this time.

-Crumble!

Turned to dust and disappeared.

A wave of neutralization.

The Immortals shattered as if they had all hit an invisible wall.

Two people appeared in response to my signal.

"Should we take care of all the immortals now?"

"Please."

One was Scarlett.

"Let's go, Lint."

The other was Kono Lint.

The two had been waiting for my signal.

Scarlett had been holding her breath, waiting for this crucial moment.

After Kono Lint had brought Scarlett, who had been imprisoned, to this place, they watched the situation and waited for me to send the signal.

It was obvious that the immortal would attack me, so they were waiting for this moment.

I had been running away until the moment the immortal could disappear.

Somewhere on the battlefield, my people were fighting the immortals as well.

That too, would soon end.

From the moment I gave the signal, Kono Lint would transport Scarlett around the battlefield in an instant, neutralizing all the immortals.

Scarlett could turn an immortal to dust with just a little bit of strength, and Kono Lint could quickly move her all over the battlefield.

As long as Scarlett was present, the immortal could not kill me.

Of course, there were many dangerous moments to see.

I had to erase all the immortals before they could do anything more out of the ordinary.

"Hey… Can you do… that?"

Kono Lint muttered, staring at the massive dark figure in the distance with anxious eyes.

"We can."

Yes, that was no lie.

"There's no time for long conversations."

Scarlett spoke with a resolute expression, but one that showed unwavering determination.

"Survive."

It wasn't a plea to save humanity.

Nor was it a plea to save everyone.

It was a plea to survive.

I couldn't bring myself to say that it was harder than saving everyone else.

I erased all other thoughts.

How absurd it was to think that I wouldn't use Alsbringer in this situation.

Even if I could fight it, what would be the point if everyone else died in the process?

As I dodged its attacks, more and more people died.

The dragon's screams and body were getting closer and closer.

As I approached the proximity of the otherworldly dragon rampaging through the rain, I saw someone running towards me from the opposite direction.

It was Ellen.

Roar!

Ellen reached it first.

With the Sun's cloak draped around her, she leaped high into the air, through the extended curtain of night.

She swung her Void Sword towards the dragon's head.

And then.

Slash!

The dragon's head was severed.

It was incredibly easy, almost anticlimactic.

The next moment, it vanished with a deafening noise.

"What… the?"

What had I just witnessed?

Because of the downpour, there might be some who had no idea what had just happened.

Those who were too far away might not even know that the otherworldly dragon had appeared.

However, those who had witnessed the spectacle from a distance would have been shouting in a mix of awe and jubilation, as they saw the dragon, which had neutralized the titan in a single blow, being sliced away in just one stroke.

The final boss had appeared.

And it had been sliced away by Ellen.

But there would be no one in the world more shocked than me.

That was not a monster that could die like that.

Not so anticlimactically.

Not so easily vanished.

It wasn't even a fight.

Ellen had merely swung the Void Sword, cutting down the monster as easily as any other.

The Void Sword, capable of cutting down anything.

If the powers of the dragons from the other world and the Lament were essentially the same, could the dragons from the other world also be cut down by it?

Only I was aware of the absurdity of the situation that had just unfolded.

I had intended to use the Alsbringer.

However, Ellen had easily dispatched the enemy I had struggled with, agonizing over every decision, in a single stroke.

Regardless, I didn't use the Alsbringer.

After Ellen's Lament took on the form of the Void, was that final monster destined to vanish so futilely?

I simply couldn't be sure if the Void Sword would work on it.

I knew the Void Sword could cut down 'anything,' but not divine relics.

However, the dragon from the other world was not an exception to the Void Sword.

Should I be happy about it?

Yes.

I should be happy.

But I knew it wasn't that simple.

The dragon had disappeared.

The Gate Incident would end once the remaining monsters in the area were dealt with.

The Immortals could be handled by Scarlett.

But.

My remaining tasks had just begun.

That's why I couldn't be happy.

Thud!

Ellen, who seemed to have flown through the sky, landed lightly on the ground.

Roar!

In the now-vast clearing where the dragon from the other world had appeared, Ellen, soaked in rain, was looking directly at me.

"…"

About a hundred meters, maybe?

The distance wasn't that great.

The dragon from the other world had vanished all too easily.

I had to confront something here anyway.

It's just that it changed from the dragon of the other world to another being.

I had to face the hero.

Somehow, the moment I saw the dragon from the other world, I thought I had to use the Alsbringer.

And I had actually tried to use it.

But if I did, what would happen to the future I had seen?

The future where I die, and Ellen dies.

What was that all about?

The thought crossed my mind for a moment.

It turned out like this.

There could never have been a situation where I would have to use the Alsbringer to hunt down the likes of the dragon from the other world.

Ellen looked at me from the rain.

No, that wasn't Ellen.

A gathering of souls that controlled Ellen's body.

An aggregation of vengeful spirits, perhaps even more massive and enormous than before.

It definitely had a will of its own.

When we first met, I had a conversation with it.

Could I win?

I had fought countless times in my dreams.

I had died countless times.

But could I win in this battle that had become reality?

It was destined.

As long as I was the son of the Demon King and Ellen was the sister of the hero.

It was bound to happen someday.

From the moment I got closer to Ellen, I sensed that this moment would eventually come.

Even knowing that it would happen someday, I didn't hesitate to get close to Ellen.

This was the price.

If I had shunned Ellen from the start?

If I had kept my distance without any help or interaction between us, perhaps.

None of this would have happened.

Even knowing I would regret it, I had grown closer.

I wanted to avoid this moment somehow, but deep down, I knew.

One way or another, I would have to fight a life-and-death battle with Ellen.

It was a predetermined course.

I had overcome the last trial with ease.

With that, there would be no more sacrifices of others to the dragons of the

otherworld.

Instead, the trial was bestowed upon me alone.

A cruel trial, only for me.

I had to defeat Ellen.

No, merely defeating her was not enough.

I had to reclaim her without taking her life.

Somehow, I had to subdue Ellen, who was determined to kill me, without killing her, and even take her back.

I had to face a battle with slim chances of victory, without even being prepared to kill.

Was it even possible?

But there was one thing I knew for certain.

If the future I had seen was correct—

If I lost, it wouldn't be just me who died.

Ellen, who would have killed me, would take her own life.

I could have sacrificed my own life to kill that creature when facing the otherworld's dragon, but this time, I couldn't even die.

I couldn't even fight with the resolve to kill.

If I were to die, Ellen would die as well.

The Gate incident was over, and the last monster was dead.

But, could there be a day as cruel as today for me?

The torrential rain poured down, running down its face and eyes.

It looked like it was weeping helplessly, without any expression.

No, it was a being that was undoubtedly crying for real.

'It' pointed its sword at me silently.

"O Demon King……”

A voice that seemed like a blend of multiple voices.

It was a bizarre resonance that felt as though not only the eardrums but the soul would be torn just by listening.

Just hearing that voice seemed to recreate the pain and fear I had felt when it had swallowed my body.

How long had Ellen endured that?

A culmination of hatred towards me.

A collective of anger and sorrow from those who had to lose so much without any fault.

It had definitely told me before that it would take away everything I loved.

'It' spoke.

"Now, let us end this."

With a brief and concise declaration of war, it slowly approached me.

In the depths of the evaporated Diane, there was only Ellen and me.

The battlefield's deafening noise and the monsters' screams had grown distant.

-Swoooosh

-Splash.

The sound of footsteps splashing in the puddles amidst the rain was loud enough for

me to hear.

No one would likely be watching this place, which had become a massive crater.

-Splash

-Rumble

Calm footsteps were neither desperate nor impatient.

The distance was certainly closing.

The atmosphere was different.

Ellen, who had reached the Master Class, was not only clad in blue aura armor but was also emanating an unknown pale white smoke from her body.

Countless vengeful spirits must be exerting their power.

Their true objective was not to end the Gate incident, but to kill me.

So, they would exert their most powerful force.

They would do everything they could to kill me.

-Groooooooow

An indescribable eerie resonance and faint melody flowed from Ellen's body.

The Hero.

Perhaps, Ellen at that moment could be considered the strongest among humanity.

Such a being wore the sharpest sword and the sturdiest armor in the world.

The vessel called the Hero contained the anger of all those who had died because of the Demon King.

It would be strange if the last enemy the Demon King had to face in order to rule the world wasn't the one right in front of him.

Amidst numerous unfavorable conditions, the one fortunate thing was that I was different from the otherworldly dragon Ellen had slain in a single strike.

I had previously confirmed that the Void Sword couldn't cut through divine relics.

-Splash!

With a light sound of splashing through a puddle, Ellen approached me and casually swung the Void Sword.

Her light and calm leap, along with the trajectory of the approaching Void Sword drawing an arc, almost appeared beautiful at a glance.

The Void Sword definitely couldn't cut through divine relics.

-Screech!

"Ugh… ugh!"

However, just because it couldn't cut through them didn't mean I could withstand it.

A single stroke of the Void Sword.

I managed to block it.

And my wrist broke.

CHAPTER 666

In a forest on the outskirts of the imperial capital.

Christina did not tell Anna and Louis Ancton everything that had transpired.

Saviolin Turner had attacked the underground laboratory.

She could only flee with them, and now the laboratory had been destroyed.

That was as far as she explained.

She deliberately withdrew the Immortals, or that she re-engaged them to kill the Demon King.

She didn't bother mentioning those things that wouldn't make them feel any better.

Anna and Louis were both astonished by the fact that they couldn't stop even one Saviolin Turner.

The empire had interfered with the Immortals so they could no longer be restored, but in the end, it was Diane's situation that mattered most.

Christina had watched the entire battle of the Immortals.

She tried to prioritize killing the Demon King, but he kept eluding them like a rat using the monsters.

Neither could she kill Harriet nor Liana, not with the sudden appearance of the unexpected monster, Cliffman.

It was a blood-curdling feeling.

The Immortals continued to be destroyed, and their losses couldn't be recovered.

As if knowing this would happen, she only used the Immortals to escape.

And then.

Christina saw it.

The arrival of an unknown, colossal monster.

Its overwhelming and unfathomable presence.

But before she could truly feel fear from the destruction and disaster it caused, she saw it being cut down by Ellen Artorius.

Christina had a hunch.

The Gate incident had ended.

However, before that, something more shocking happened to Christina.

Seeing Christina with wide-open eyes and blood on her lips from biting them so hard, Louis Ancton cautiously asked.

"Christina, what's wrong?"

“…Scarlett."

At those words, not only Louis but also Anna's expression hardened.

"Scarlett, and Kono Lint… They're destroying the Immortals."

Scarlett, who should have been safely evacuated somewhere in the city, was breaking the Immortals alongside Kono Lint as they moved through the battlefield.

There wasn't even a fight.

As Scarlett used her power where the Immortals were, they simply turned to dust and disappeared.

Her power was absolute against the Immortals.

Scarlett could do what was impossible for Ellen or Saviolin Turner.

It was certain that Scarlett was on the side of the Demon King.

But since when?

"Scarlett…?"

"Yes."

Louis Ancton asked with a puzzled expression, and Christina slowly nodded her head.

"Scarlett betrayed us."

Christina spoke in a low, twisted voice.

There was no way to know the reason or circumstances that led Scarlett to be there.

Ludwig's words that they could trust Scarlett had turned out to be nonsense from a naive fool.

They should have killed her.

But the Immortals could never kill Scarlett.

No, from the beginning, no one, not even the Immortals, could kill Scarlett now.

Kono Lint was with her.

Catching them, let alone touching them, would be impossible.

When Saviolin Turner attacked the underground laboratory, Christina thought her intention was to buy time so the Immortals couldn't return.

So, she sent all the Immortals back to the battlefield, knowing they couldn't hurt her anyway.

But then, Saviolin Turner destroyed the laboratory without killing her.

The Emperor had read everything.

The Immortals, who had returned to the battlefield, were hunting the Demon King.

However, the Demon King, instead of fleeing from the pursuing Immortals, had manipulated them, making it appear as if the Immortals were leading the vanguard, throwing the entire Diane forces into chaos.

And when the monsters that had been used to fend off the pursuit were finally depleted, and the Demon King was caught, he seemed to have been waiting, summoning Scarlett and starting to crush the Immortals in return.

The Immortals were exploited to the extreme by the Demon King.

They had been read by the Emperor.

They had been used by the Demon King.

Now, the Immortals would be rendered powerless as Scarlett and Kono Lint tore through the entire battlefield.

The research facility that could revive the incapacitated Immortals had been destroyed.

At this rate, all of the Immortals would disappear.

"We have to remove the Immortals from the battlefield."

The absolute number of Immortals had been rapidly decreasing even as Scarlett and Kono Lint appeared.

It was a desperate situation.

If all the Immortals disappeared like this, there would be nothing they could do.

First, they had to preserve the power of the Immortals.

They had to find another way.

More than half of the Immortals still remained.

At this rate, the Immortals would be annihilated.

They had to recover the remaining Immortals and find another way.

First, they had to find a way to deal with Scarlett somehow.

Using the Immortals as a means to devise something could come later.

"Is the Gate Incident over?"

In response to Anna's question, Christina stared at her.

Yes.

It was right to discuss it from the Gate Incident.

"It seems so. We may have to kill the remaining monsters, but Diane will fall. However, if we don't take the time to reorganize the Immortals first, we'll be in danger…"

-Thump!

"…What?"

Christina couldn't help but let out a bewildered sound.

"Anna!"

And then, Louis Ancton shouted in the sudden turn of events.

Anna's blackened hand was lodged in Christina's heart.

Christina couldn't even feel the pain.

The events unfolding before her eyes were just something…

A dream.

Should she call it that?

She couldn't think of anything other than how surreal it was.

Anna de Gerna spoke calmly.

"The pathetic villain act is over."

"What…?"

-Thump!

Anna pulled her hand out of Christina's chest.

Bright red blood flowed from the hole in her chest.

Anna stared at Christina with dark eyes.

"Let the Immortals disappear."

"You… What on earth…? Why…?"

Christina was dumbfounded, unable to say anything, while Louis Ancton stood pale, unable to comprehend the situation.

"Wh… Why…?"

As Anna calmly watched Christina's lips twitch in disbelief, she spoke.

Christina knew magic.

But she didn't know people.

"You're no longer useful."

Anna stared coldly at her dying friend.

"Bertus said to tell you that."

She left a cold farewell message.

Christina died.

Her eyes didn't even close.

It was only moments before her breath completely stopped that she realized what had happened to her.

Tears streaming down her face, her eyes wide open, and biting her lips, she died.

Louis Ancton couldn't understand what had just happened before his eyes.

"Anna… Anna, what have you done? If Christina dies…!"

"The Immortal would start killing indiscriminately."

Now, the Immortal would completely lose control and run amok.

"But if we recall the Immortals like this and start planning the next move, no one will be able to stop Christina."

No one could respond if that terrifying army began guerilla warfare against the entire continent.

Scarlett or Kono Lint?

Before they appeared, it would be enough to carry out destructive operations or assassinations and then disappear.

It might be impossible to recover, but if they induced local battles, the Immortal could not only endlessly hinder the Demon King's world from being established but also destroy it at any time.

Just as the Demon King had been able to destroy the human world until now but had not done so.

It was clear that if Christina couldn't kill the Demon King now, she would attempt such a thing in the next stage, and she could actually do it.

The Immortals were in one place, and Scarlett was there, who could certainly neutralize such an Immortal.

If not now, the chance to completely erase the Immortals would never come.

"So I killed her."

Asking if the Gate incident was over was to confirm that.

If the Gate incident was completely over, it was now the Immortals' turn to disappear.

Timing was crucial.

If Christina was killed too soon, the Immortal would crush the allied forces.

If she was killed too late, they wouldn't be able to deal with the rampaging Immortal.

So Anna had been holding her breath.

Until the most certain and safe moment to kill Christina came.

Anna had been receiving Bertus's instructions.

It was impossible to know when Bertus had approached Anna.

She had been waiting until the last moment, until the moment when it was okay to kill Christina.

A friend had died.

There was someone who, in trying to save that friend, had ultimately put their friends in danger.

There was a friend who had killed that friend with their own hands.

There were things between friends that only ended with death.

In the end, Christina was killed by a friend's hand, unbelievably.

That's why Christina was a third-rate, no, not even a third-rate villain.

She had been unable to doubt her friend until the end.

Such a third-rate villain.

Anna, carrying Christina's corpse, looked at Louis.

Anna's back was soaked in bright red blood.

Anna had fulfilled Bertus's command.

Anna had not received Bertus's orders in exchange for a promise.

Bertus had no intention of giving anything to Anna, and Anna had no intention of receiving anything.

It seemed like something she had to do.

So she did it.

Like Christina had done this because it was something she had to do.

Anna had also done this because she felt she had to.

There wasn't really anything she wanted.

Bertus hadn't expected any more from Anna.

After all, the empire would disappear, so even if Bertus promised something, it would be meaningless now.

"Let's go."

There was no place they had to go now.

Louis Ancton, a silent observer and collaborator of all situations, muttered blankly at Anna's words.

“…Where to?"

Did they have a place to go?

A place they could go?

Was there one?

After all, since all three of them were criminals who would go down in history, there was no place for them to set foot.

"I don't know…"

Carrying the friend she had killed with her own hands on her back.

"There must be a place… where we need to go."

With dead eyes, Anna smiled faintly.

CHAPTER 667

-Clang!

Countless times, his wrist had shattered.

Just enduring the sword pressure carried by the Void Sword caused his wrist, shoulder, and arm to break.

If it hadn't been for Tiamata's regenerative power, he would have died the moment they crossed blades.

He was accustomed to pain.

Having died thousands of times in his dreams, he was familiar with death, and pain was no stranger to him.

-…

Ellen slowly approached him, having been flung away.

She wasn't hasty.

Her movements took into account that he couldn't avoid this battle.

Thus, she approached neither leisurely nor hastily.

Her slow and calm advance suffocated him on its own.

A blue aura and a faint gray energy flickered all over Ellen's body.

He hadn't even been able to defeat the Ellen he had imagined in his dreams.

He had thought the real Ellen would be different, and the Ellen who had even acquired the power of the vengeful spirits would be even stronger.

He had never underestimated her.

He had thought she would be stronger than anything he could imagine.

But he couldn't bring himself to kill Ellen.

He dared not even entertain such a thought.

And so, he couldn't give his all.

But that was arrogance.

Even if he put in all his effort.

Even if he employed every means possible.

He realized that he couldn't defeat Ellen.

Ellen, who had been walking slowly, closed the distance in just a few strides as it narrowed.

-Crash!

The moment the Void Sword and Alsbringer clashed, the ground was torn apart by the shockwave.

-Bang! Clang!

Two consecutive strikes.

And then.

-Thud!

"Ugh… Hngh!"

She knocked him away with a knee strike to his solar plexus.

His rib was shattered.

-Uuung!

He recovered with Tiamata's power.

He had pushed his magic regeneration to its limit.

Even so, the moment he withstood a single exchange, he was destroyed by the overwhelming force.

The gap was too large.

He had thought he had grown strong enough to rival anyone.

But Ellen was too strong.

The gap wasn't as wide as it used to be.

It wasn't like he would lose his grip on his sword while blocking Ellen's attacks.

However, each time their swords clashed, the bones and muscles protected by his aura shattered and tore.

The gap was still that wide.

Ellen in her right mind.

This was not the Ellen who had felt guilty for even pointing her sword at him, the one who had only taken hits during Charlotte's execution ceremony.

If she weren't in that state, could he not even land a single effective blow on Ellen?

The one born with all kinds of talents had the strongest weapon and the strongest armor, and even possessed countless vengeful spirits.

Was it impossible for him to defeat her when all that was pitted against him?

It wasn't just close combat.

-Whoom!

A flash of flame, like lightning, grazed his cheek.

The flames emitted from the Sun Cloak, not just the Void Sword, penetrated his defenses.

-Sizzle

The sound that should not have come from human skin accompanied the healing of the wound.

The only thing he could rely on was his regenerative power.

And the power of Alsbringer, which heightened his abilities against stronger opponents.

Ellen had grown stronger through the power of the divine relic, but without a divine relic, he couldn't even engage in this battle.

His wrist would have broken and he would have dropped his sword in the first exchange, and his neck would have flown off with the third attack.

If not for Tiamata, he would have died long ago.

The Void Sword and Tiamata clashed.

-Clang!

As the Void Sword and the holy sword collided, producing sparks, his attempt to push Ellen to the right was thwarted as she twisted his wrist, causing him to stumble.

No, to be more precise.

From the moment he lunged, she knew exactly how he would react.

She had read him like an open book.

-Thud!

"...!"

In an instant, his chest was pierced, and his lung was skewered before he could even

react.

Before her sword could cut through his body, he kicked Ellen's body and retreated.

"Ugh… ugh!"

-Woosh!

Tiamata's divine power healed his fatal wound.

Without a divine relic, one could not block the attack of the Void Sword.

Although he was used to pain and his concentration did not waver, the sensation of a sword entering his chest was always unsettling.

She attacked relentlessly.

-Bang! Crash! Clang!

In the suffocating onslaught, one misstep would lead to a fatal injury and death.

The problem was not just that.

Ellen had no weaknesses.

In fact, she had too many.

Ellen, who focused solely on offense, did not defend at all.

-Screech!

"Kuh… ugh!"

But when I tried to exploit that opening, I only felt a pain so intense that it seemed as if my whole body would shatter due to the powerful backlash.

It wasn't because of the aura armor Ellen wore, but rather the backlash created by the Sun's Cloak itself.

It wasn't that she didn't defend.

She didn't need to defend.

Even an all-out attack couldn't get through.

There was a reason she had been slaughtering monsters alone at the deepest parts of the battlefield.

A sword that could cut through anything.

A shield that could block any attack.

He knew Ellen was strong.

But to this extent?

He couldn't even touch a single hair on her head with his all-out attack.

On top of that, the difference in the level of their divine relics was too great.

Against Ellen, who wielded two relics specialized in offense and defense, he had no chance of reaching her.

-Bang! Crash! Clang!

He was barely able to dodge Ellen's relentless attacks.

There was a fundamental gap between them. His attacks couldn't touch her, and even one wrong move against her attacks would cost him his life.

-Screech!

"Kuh…!"

With a single powerful kick, he felt as if all the bones in his body were breaking as he was sent flying helplessly backward.

At least he could recover from non-fatal injuries.

The power of healing.

Tiamata's divine power that allowed him to regenerate no matter how injured he was.

But in this situation, it only prolonged his life a little.

With an emotionless expression, she stared at him as he was flung far away.

-Swoosh!

Her emotionless gaze was heart-wrenching.

Could he not defeat her?

From the day they met, was this destined to happen?

Was he fated to be defeated here?

What had he been doing all this time?

In the end, he couldn't surpass her.

Was the story of the Demon King being defeated by the Hero always waiting for him?

He didn't endure all this pain and struggle just to die here.

And it's not just him who will die, but her as well, if she killed him.

He didn't know.

Somehow, he had managed to avoid fatal injuries, but soon his life would be lost.

Luck wouldn't last forever.

—---

As it measured the distance, it silently opened its mouth.

"Is it unfair?"

"…”

There was clearly a will within it.

I didn't know exactly how it worked.

But I knew that conversation wasn't impossible.

"I saw you trying to protect the humans."

So, it must have seen everything.

"Now, we also know that you tried to protect the humans."

It must know that I was doing all of this for a reason.

It just turned out this way.

It knew my intentions were not directed towards evil.

It asked me.

"Even so, is it unfair that it ended up like this?"

How could it not be unfair?

Many people had died, but due to the altered progression of events from the original story, the allied forces' losses were relatively minor in comparison.

There was only one step left.

Just one more step.

All I needed to do was reclaim Ellen.

If I could do that, I would have no more wishes.

No more greed.

But in the end, I didn't reclaim Ellen and died.

I couldn't even match my opponent in battle.

How could that not be unfair?

I just needed to take one more step, but I couldn't.

I might have to lose everything because of my defeat in the final battle.

"Of course."

I didn't want to say it wasn't unfair.

I couldn't bring myself to say it wasn't unfair.

All these things.

All the days I'd spent so far.

I thought I might be able to find her.

And sometimes.

After everything returned to normal, occasionally living as we used to.

Really, just occasionally.

I had imagined that.

All those days.

It was heartbreaking.

Was that all?

"By the time I came to my senses, I was the frail prince of a demon race, on the verge of extinction."

"With no memory at all."

"Knowing only that the world was soon to end."

"Desperately not wanting to die, relying solely on a weak disguise magic that could

be undone with a single dispel, I fell to the Imperial Capital."

"Until now…"

"Trying somehow to save everyone, the world ended up like this because of me."

"Still, I clenched my teeth and came this far."

"Now, you just need to come to your senses."

"But you're on the verge of death, and I can't bear to see it."

"Isn't it unfair?"

In fact, everything happened because of me.

It seemed like I would die with only the last step remaining in the conclusion of everything.

Wouldn't it be strange if I didn't feel this was unfair and heartbreaking?

I was angry, indignant, and heartbroken.

How did I come this far?

To die after coming this far.

Amidst my appeal of unfairness, which didn't fit my current situation, it didn't ridicule me.

"How pitiful……."

It neither reproached nor criticized my confession.

It just.

Closed its eyes in the rain.

The rainwater flowed down its eyes, endlessly.

Countless raindrops fell onto its head, streaming down its face and eyes, pooling in puddles.

Were those tears?

It should be the downpour summoned by Liana.

-Ssaaaaaaah

-Urrrrrrr

I felt as if this torrential rain was the tears it shed.

If the whole world was crying, and its tears became rain.

In this miserable downpour that seemed like that.

It spoke amidst the world's sobbing rain.

"Then, what shall we do?"

I couldn't tell how many of "we" there were anymore.

"Weren't we pitiful?"

"Simply swept away in your stories, we had to disappear."

"We."

"We had no role to play. We couldn't resist."

"By monsters."

"Sometimes by humanity."

"Sometimes."

"By you."

"Because of your reasons alone."

"The 'I' that had to disappear."

"Our trampled lives."

"Shouldn't we feel more wronged than you?"

"With just the words 'it couldn't be helped.'"

"Should we accept that?"

With eyes closed, the mingled voices spoke dispassionately, not shouting in rage and despair, but conveying a profound sadness.

They had not dreamed of anything.

They were crushed and vanished because of the dreams of others.

More precisely, because of the dream I had.

No matter how much I say that wasn't my intention, the deaths that occurred because of me are undeniable.

Their grief and anger are natural, and undoubtedly justified.

For me to complain about my own grief to them would be unbearable and unjust for them as well.

"There's nothing we can do about our sadness."

"There's nothing we can do about our grievances."

"Just like how we died amidst those words."

"Your Majesty."

"If you cannot restore our lives to us."

"If you cannot return everything you took from us."

"In grievances and sorrow, and within anger."

"Embrace your inevitable death."

"Only by dying like that."

"Will you at least receive the minimal recompense."

"For all the deaths that have occurred because of you."

Restoring lives was impossible.

Both it and I knew that.

So, I had to die too.

One step short of achieving everything, with only one step left.

In agony and despair, in grievances and anger.

Only by dying amidst sorrow could it be the slightest atonement.

I shouldn't be alive.

Trying to live is excessive greed.

It looked at me with its eyes open.

"But your heart, we understand."

—---

Had time refined it somehow?

It didn't appear as if it was engulfed in intense emotions like when it first appeared.

Or had it, in Ellen's body, come to resemble her calm demeanor?

Its gaze.

Its eyes, once filled with emptiness and abyss, now.

Looked like a frozen, deep lake.

Not warm.

Not without animosity.

Just serene.

"We have no intention of forgiving you, nor of sparing your life."

"But at the very least, out of respect for you."

"Let's make a deal."

It acknowledged me but couldn't spare my life.

I had to pay the price. Knowing my intention didn't change the outcome, and the dead didn't come back to life.

I had to pay the price.

But it seemed to have a proposal.

A deal, it said.

"Just die."

It was a simple and cruel statement.

"Your loved ones."

"Your precious people."

"Everything you want to protect."

"We will spare everyone except you."

"Even from this child you loved, we will depart."

"And then, disappear."

"You will never see with your own eyes how everyone you loved lives on."

"To such a world of insensitivity. Come with us."

"Filled with sorrow, resentment, and rage."

"Becoming a being like us."

"Vanishing from the world."

So that's what it was.

I finally understood.

What that 'future' meant.

The scene where I was killed, and Ellen committed suicide.

That future wasn't a future of defeat.

It wasn't about losing a battle.

It wasn't about dying in combat.

I saw the scene after this deal.

Since I could solve everything with my life, I would have accepted this deal.

Even if I fought, I'd lose.

I knew I would die anyway.

If I hadn't seen the next scene.

I would have definitely accepted this deal.

What I saw in the preview was my lifeless body and Ellen taking her own life.

It wasn't my appearance after defeat.

It was the aftermath of accepting the deal to die and end everything.

If I didn't accept the deal, it wouldn't just kill me.

Not just me, but everyone, including Harriet and Olivia.

It would start killing everyone who sided with the Demon King.

And eventually, it would kill Ellen, who it was possessing.

But if I died quietly now, it would vanish.

If I hadn't seen that future, I would have accepted the deal.

Because that would have been the best choice I could make.

Dying in a meaningless struggle, and everyone I loved dying too.

Or just me dying.

It was obvious which one to choose.

There was no need to die with others for nothing.

It wasn't lying.

It was sincere when it said it would kill only me and then disappear.

The reason Ellen took her own life in the future I saw was because she realized she had killed me with her own hands.

The promise would be kept.

But there was one truth I knew because I knew the future.

It wasn't just me dying, but Ellen, who killed me, would also die.

This wasn't a deal where only I died.

Demon King and the Hero.

If, in the end, only the two of them die, would peace come to those who remain?

Would vanishing with it be the only ending allowed for me?

I might have been able to beat Ellen if I used the Alsbringer, but even if I did, Ellen and I would die together, so it would be pointless.

Whether Ellen killed me and then committed suicide or I killed Ellen with the power of the divine artifact and died as a result, it was ultimately the same thing.

The future I saw was not a matter of the result of the battle but a matter of choice.

If I refused, I would have to fight it, and if I lost, it would kill everyone I loved.

If I accepted, only Ellen and I would die, and everything else would be left to those who remained.

Even without me, everyone would somehow survive.

Some would grieve, and most people would cheer that the Hero had defeated the Demon King.

How ridiculous.

The Great Demon War ended with the mutual annihilation of the Hero and the Demon King.

And even now, beyond time, were the Hero and the Demon King destined to vanish together?

Was it always the fate of the Hero and the Demon King to die together?

I proved that I have done all this not to destroy something but to protect something.

By giving up everything and dying at its hand at the very end, I prove it.

Even when reaching the end of everything, I shouldn't have anything.

If I were alone, it would be fine.

If it were just me.

It would be alright.

In the end, I saw the image of Ellen, who killed me with her own hands and looked confused as she regained her senses.

And then I saw Ellen, who ultimately chose death.

Numerous times.

Dozens of times.

Hundreds of times.

Whenever my will weakened. Whenever my determination wavered.

I saw that sight and clenched my teeth.

I didn't accumulate this time to see such a future, I vowed and did something.

I was killed by Ellen in my dreams.

I tried desperately to hold up the collapsing world.

But in the end, I have to choose the future I never wanted to see?

I've talked too much about things that can't be helped.

It can't be helped.

So let's do it this way now.

I must accept it.

Those unavoidable things.

This time, I want to try somehow.

I don't want to choose the obvious option, at least not this time.

I might lose, but I won't necessarily lose.

I won't necessarily die.

There isn't only the possibility that I'll lose.

Just as I can't buy my happiness with someone else's misfortune.

I can't buy someone else's happiness with my misfortune, can I?

It's a horrible and cruel thing to say.

But can't I be happy now too?

In the end.

I don't want to die.

Dying is scary.

I'm afraid of the situation after my death.

Ellen, who will take her own life, and those left behind.

—---

Though I've only seen Ellen's appearance, I'm afraid and trembling at the thought of imagining the thoughts and emotions of those I haven't seen.

That's why.

This time, I will make a choice that shouldn't be made.

I'll choose, even knowing that it's an option that shouldn't be chosen.

"No."

I shake my head.

Yes.

Let's think of it simply.

"I made a promise."

I definitely made a promise.

There were countless days when I almost died.

I've encountered enemies I couldn't defeat in battle.

There was a time when I survived in front of such an enemy, just because of a single promise.

"I won't make you sad."

Luna Artorious.

The only reason she saved me was that.

I wouldn't make Ellen sad.

I said I'd try to do something about the later events.

"I made a promise with your mother."

She didn't believe my words.

Just as I knew this would happen, Luna knew too.

But in the end, if I die by Ellen's hand and Ellen takes her own life, that promise will be broken.

She was not an ordinary being.

It's a promise I made with the gods' incarnation.

So, I must keep it.

No, I want to keep it.

"So, even if I want to die for you, I can't."

The moment I said that.

Suddenly.

Really suddenly.

The world stopped.

And turned red.

"What… is this?"

Everything stopped, and only I could move.

Even the falling rain had stopped.

In a world where time had stopped, something had changed.

The sky, which had been full of dark clouds, had cleared.

And there was a huge hole.

A black hole pierced through the center of the sun, which had become dozens of times larger than usual.

No.

It wasn't a hole.

Something was blocking the sun.

The sun, which was dozens of times larger than usual.

And the moon, which covered it.

"A solar… eclipse?"

The world stopped with an unexpected solar eclipse.

And then.

Between the suspended raindrops, something that had never been there before appeared in front of me.

"You haven't forgotten the promise."

At the sudden appearance of someone's voice, familiar and yet nostalgic, I turned my head.

I couldn't help but doubt my eyes.

The person I thought I would never see again in my lifetime was there.

The moon.

And the sun.

I knew someone related to those two.

And as far as I knew, there was only one person who could cause such a miracle.

"Mother…?"

Luna Artorious.

The person who had appeared in the moonlight now stood before me, accompanied by a massive solar eclipse.

"Didn't I tell you?"

The words she said when she let me go back then.

"The blessings of the moon and the sun will be with you."

Was that not a promise, but a prophecy?

CHAPTER 668

Luna Artorius.

She revealed herself as the eclipse occurred.

Had she been watching from somewhere?

When she spoke of the blessings of the sun and the moon, I had assumed it was just a customary phrase to wish for good luck.

Was it important that I had refused the deal, or was something else more important? I didn't know.

The promise to not sadden Ellen.

Was my determination to keep that promise what caused Luna to intervene?

I couldn't know the exact reason.

As far as I knew, the person closest to the Absolute in the world had appeared.

It was impossible for me to defeat Ellen in her current state.

But Luna might be able to.

Alsbringer summoned an avatar.

However, she was the avatar of two gods.

She could undoubtedly do it.

"How were you able to come this far?" she asked, seeming both pitiful and proud.

Luna looked at me with a wistful smile.

"I'll take care of 'that' for you," she said, plainly stating her purpose.

Take care of it.

"So Ellen will…"

"Return to her original state. In the form you desire, the form you've been longing for. Completely whole."

At those words, my heart raced like mad.

I could have Ellen back, whole again.

Back to her original state.

All the vengeful spirits would vanish, the Gate Incident would end, and I would gain everything I desired.

That would be enough.

That would do.

Had the time I spent traveling to Rezaira to meet Luna not been about making me stronger, but instead about causing a change that would allow Luna to intervene in the world?

"I'll leave the matters of the future to you," she said.

Luna walked silently toward Ellen.

It seemed there was no need for further discussion.

Was this the end?

With everything resolved.

There would still be other issues, but would they simply be matters of the world that could be resolved if only we tried?

That's how it was.

That's how it was.

In this damned world.

There could be nothing but good fortune.

"What about you, mother?"

"…"

At my call, Luna's steps halted.

If it had been so simple, there would have been no reason not to do it by now.

There had to be a reason for Luna to appear only now.

If it had been as easy as turning her palm, she should have done it sooner.

Watching, watching, and watching.

It was clear that she had no choice but to appear.

"Will you disappear?"

"…"

"That's what's going to happen, right?"

There would surely be a price to pay.

If there were no price, Luna would have intervened long ago.

In the Tomb of the Lich, Luna had tried to kill me.

She had said that if she killed me then, she would have disappeared from the world as the price.

The same was true this time.

By doing this, she would disappear.

That's why she had appeared only now.

She wouldn't want to disappear either.

She appeared because I still wanted to keep my promise.

She must have wanted to help in any way she could.

"I was never a being that belonged to this world in the first place," Luna said, stopping and turning to face me.

"I've existed without origin for a long time, performed actions without origin, and experienced happiness without origin. I have no regrets."

"…"

"If I have no regrets, what reason do you have to feel sad for me?"

Would that be enough?

If Luna sacrificed herself to restore Ellen, would that be enough?

I didn't know.

I didn't know how to defeat Ellen.

Even if I won, I didn't know how to extract those vengeful spirits from her and extinguish them.

Luna said she would take care of it all.

Was that enough?

That was…

Such a convenient conclusion that it was difficult to accept.

I think I knew the reason for the future too.

I would have rejected Luna's intervention as well.

If Luna intervened, she would disappear.

I would have rejected her intervention and made the deal.

And Luna couldn't prevent Ellen's self-destructive actions.

I wouldn't have wanted Luna to sacrifice herself when I could solve everything on my own.

But things had changed.

I knew the outcome after accepting the deal.

The predetermined future where I knew nothing and the present were clearly different.

Leaving Luna to sacrifice herself was the best solution I could find through the future I saw?

Was I really…

Incapable of doing anything and playing any role?

"What about father?"

"…"

My question might have been too irrelevant in this desperate situation, as Luna seemed a little taken aback.

As if it were pathetic for me to ask such a question in this situation.

"I finished talking with Ronan."

As if to say that I didn't need to worry about it since they had talked enough.

But…

Contrary to the image in Rezaira, I had a rough idea of what their relationship actually looked like.

The wife, an incarnation of the gods.

A human husband.

Of course, Ronan wouldn't have had any say in the matter.

"So, it's not because you decided to do that, that you told him, right?"

"…"

"You're right."

I had no choice but to know that Ronan had been informed, as Luna only stared at me without speaking.

Luna, who was about to approach Ellen, eventually came to me with a very annoyed expression.

-Poke

Luna pushed my forehead with the tip of her index finger.

"In a situation like this."

-Poke

"A good child."

-Poke

"Should be shedding tears of gratitude."

-Poke

"And staying quiet."

-Poke!

"That's what manners are."

-Slap!

"Ouch!"

I fell back from the final slap of her reprimand.

Despite the situation.

I couldn't help but laugh.

"I don't want that."

"…"

"I promised not to make Ellen sad, but it's not right for you to die either."

"I'm not dying. I'm just returning to the will and power I originally belonged to."

"If I can't see you anymore, how is that any different from dying?"

"…"

In the end, it was just replacing one sorrow with another.

If I exchanged Ellen for Luna, wouldn't Ellen still end up being sad?

Whether I died to get Ellen back, or Luna disappeared.

In the end, something important would be lost from Ellen all the same.

The irritation disappeared from Luna's expression.

Her face turned cold.

The first time she saw me.

It was the expression she had when she tried to kill me in all seriousness.

Just facing that expression sent chills down my spine.

"Then, do you have any other options?"

"…"

"If I disappear like this, you'll die in a reckless fight, and that thing will go mad."

"…"

"Even though there's no other way but for me to disappear, you're just throwing a tantrum because you don't want me to?"

"Yes."

Luna's brows narrowed at my words, which had come out without any hesitation.

"How can you be so… so…"

Luna heaved a deep sigh.

"Could you be any more stubborn and foolish…"

Her words weren't just empty; she seemed genuinely disappointed. Even in this situation, when everything could have been easily resolved by someone else, I was throwing a tantrum without any solution. It seemed unbearable to her that I was so pathetic.

There was no way, no method.

I was just being obstinate.

I wanted to get Ellen back.

But I didn't want Luna to disappear either.

Was there no better outcome?

Why did something always have to be sacrificed?

"That's how it always was."

"…"

"You know."

Looking back, it had always been like that.

There had never been any clear way.

I didn't know how to become stronger.

I didn't know the cause of the Gate incident.

I didn't know how to find Rezaira.

I had never had a complete solution for any problem.

But I had faced them head-on.

While I had failed countless times, miraculously, I had found some way or somehow resolved the problems.

Though not absolute, I had become stronger.

The Gate incident happened, but I eventually found out why.

I didn't know the way to Rezaira, but I had found it somehow.

That was why Luna appeared before me now.

"You think I don't know that? But how everything worked out until now was truly miraculous."

"That's why."

"Shut up and listen."

"…"

"Where's the guarantee that it will be like that this time?"

"There isn't one."

It was reckless.

Refusing the only solution while having no alternatives was undeniably foolish, even by my standards.

But what could I do?

I didn't want to lose anything.

If I accepted Luna's sacrifice now because there was no other choice.

What about next time?

Since Luna had accepted her fate, she would eventually make another sacrifice when she deemed it necessary.

I knew that compromise was necessary to survive.

But if I grew too accustomed to compromise, I would eventually sacrifice everything I held dear.

I was afraid of taking that first step.

It might be impossible to live a life without compromise.

But I didn't want to live a life accustomed to it.

I had clenched my fist tight.

And I didn't want to let go of anything.

Neither Ellen nor Luna.

I didn't want to grow accustomed to the idea that I had to give up one thing to have another.

"You foolish boy."

Finally, Luna turned her head away from me, grinding her teeth.

She was clearly furious.

Considering everything she had done for me, it was only natural that she was angry when I stubbornly refused her help despite having no alternative.

"Don't think I'll help you twice."

That was the truth.

After much deliberation, she had made up her mind to help me. But I had chosen a path that could only lead to death, rejecting the easy way out.

She wouldn't appear to help me twice.

It had been a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

With Luna's help, I could have gotten Ellen back, and it would have been the solution to everything.

But I had refused, so there wouldn't be a second chance.

Since I had no intention of accepting the deal with the vengeful spirits, I was highly likely to die.

I would probably regret not accepting Luna's help as I faced death.

But the decision was mine to make.

I didn't want to get Ellen back from a world where Luna had disappeared.

A mother died for her daughter, and I didn't want to rejoice that the daughter had returned.

Luna turned her back on me and walked toward Ellen.

With a disgusted expression, Luna looked down at me lying on the ground.

She waved her hand in the air.

Then, in her hand appeared a sword.

A cloak was draped over her shoulder.

“…What?"

"This is all I can do."

What she held in her hand was unmistakably the Moon Sword Lament and the Sun Cloak Lapelt.

The Void Sword and Sun Cloak that Ellen had held in the stopped world had disappeared.

Luna had stolen Ellen's divine relics, which had been the biggest problem.

This was something that hadn't been in the preview.

The changed future had produced a different result due to my changed words.

I didn't know what had changed.

But something was definitely different.

"See, there is something."

"Hey!"

-Smack!

"Ouch!"

In the end, I got hit.

That probably wasn't something for which she needed to pay the price of disappearing.

Right.

In the end, there was something.

There was something she could do without paying the price of disappearing, without

compromising.

I wouldn't have known this if I had just stayed put.

I would have had to console myself with the words "I had no choice" and just relayed the message to Ellen that her mother had saved her and disappeared.

My thoughts must have been written all over my face.

"Even in this situation, you're annoying to the very end."

Luna looked at me, gritting her teeth.

I was so detestable that it seemed to drive her mad.

Yet, she couldn't bear to see me die like this.

She couldn't just leave me be.

"If you still can't do anything after all this, you might as well die. You're such a worthless guy."

She cursed at me while looking at me.

Her expression was angry, annoyed, and incredulous.

She wasn't the type to reveal so much in her expression.

Come to think of it, Ellen was the same.

I must have had a talent for infuriating people with similar personalities to Ellen.

"Weren't you the one who asked if I had plans to have another child?"

"Uh? Oh… yeah."

Could it be that she really tried…?

"I never want to give birth again."

Luna clenched her teeth.

"If I have a child who's as high-maintenance as you, it'll be a disaster."

Luna and Ronan were Lucky with Ragan and Ellen.

What if their luck had run out and they ended up with a child like me?

That's why she felt anxious and scared to give birth again.

"But still…"

She said those words.

"Live."

Even though she had told me to just die, she ultimately said that.

"Whether you are a good son, or a bad son."

"Whether you are a strong son, or a weak son."

"I don't need any of that."

"I…"

"Most of all, I like my living son."

"Like how you want me to be alive, not the me that helps, but the me that you can meet anytime."

"I feel the same."

And so,

Leaving behind those sad words that stemmed from her experiences,

As she always had,

She disappeared with a single step.

CHAPTER 669

As Luna disappeared, the world began to move again.

With the sky growing cloudy once more, the raindrops that had been suspended in the air came pouring down to the earth.

-Whooooooosh!

Deafening thunder roared and lightning flashed, while all around, the battle between the monsters and the allied forces raged on.

Deep within the chaos.

Hidden in the torrential rain, the final battlefield.

The being beyond.

It was the only one, besides myself, who had noticed the sudden anomaly.

Lament and Lapelt had vanished unexpectedly.

"A strange trick, indeed."

It must have thought that I had done something, not realizing that the world had stopped.

The cloak of the sun god and the sword of the moon.

It was only natural that Luna, the incarnation of the sun and the moon, could take them away from their owners.

Giving me the maximum possible assistance without paying the heavy price of disappearing.

Or, perhaps she had taken on a cost for this, but she hadn't said, so I couldn't know.

Luna didn't want me to die.

Look.

Mother.

I was acting like a stubborn child, she said.

Being stubborn, she still helped in ways other than disappearing.

If I hadn't known the future, I would have acted like I was going to die and told my mother to leave, and Luna would have eventually given in to my stubbornness.

Then I would have died, and so would Ellen.

If I had just stayed still, Luna would have solved everything, disappeared, and Ellen would have lost her mother.

I chose the third option.

Not accepting the deal.

Not taking the hand Luna had extended at the cost of her own existence.

I would find a way.

So I told her to step back.

As a result.

Luna didn't disappear, but the two relics that made Ellen the most powerful being in the world were gone.

The absolute attack of the Void Sword.

The absolute defense of Lapelt.

She had lost both.

And I still had two relics.

It would have realized that the two relics that had suddenly vanished were no longer responding to its will.

The hero had lost her relics.

So, it might have thought that I could now be a worthy opponent.

And Luna said.

She would no longer help.

The price for refusing the favor of an incarnation was great.

She really wouldn't help anymore.

If I still lost after all this, it would be better to die, she must have meant it.

Absolute attack.

Absolute defense.

Both were gone.

It wasn't an equal condition.

I still had two relics.

Now, rather, the conditions were in my favor.

If I still lost.

If I still faced defeat.

Yes.

As Luna said.

I might as well die.

-Rumble

Thunder rumbled in the distance, somewhere far away on the battlefield.

-Whooooooosh!

In a massive puddle formed from the heavy rain, the being that had lost its relics looked at me.

"The disappearance of the relics must mean that the gods have abandoned us."

"It means the gods want you to win."

"They must want our deaths to be forgotten."

"Yes…"

"Then we shall reject the gods."

It did not demand the return of the lost relics.

Instead, it declared that if the gods had forsaken them, it would no longer seek their names.

It moved slowly.

-Swish

Between the wreckage of a collapsed building or some other unidentifiable ruins, something was there.

Something sprouted out from that corner, and she grabbed it.

It was a rusty sword, with only half its blade remaining, so broken and old that it was impossible to even know who it belonged to.

It was a sword of such poor quality that it couldn't have been much better even in its prime.

It was likely the sword of someone who had fought here long ago, during the initial Gate incident at Diane.

For the first time, an expression appeared on her face.

Undoubtedly, it was a smile.

"Rather… isn't it better this way?"

Ellen laughed, holding the broken sword.

"It's not some grand artifact."

"It's the sword of some nameless person who got swept away in your story."

"A trampled, broken weapon of a nobody."

"Isn't it more fitting to pierce your heart?"

A nothing sword, trampled and forgotten.

Countless such swords, spears, and bows would have been discarded in the world.

While it may not have been the most powerful weapon to kill me,

it was a weapon that had the right to do so.

A gray aura began to surround the broken sword.

Woosh -

The ominous gray aura enveloping the weapon began to emit a shape reminiscent of death like smoke.

A weapon of nothingness.

Rather, the ancient and fragile sword seemed as if it would break with a mere touch.

Something within that sword.

Neither magical nor divine, but something else.

A culmination of hatred, anger, and despair.

Surely, it was resentment.

"Behold, Demon King."

"Can our resentment reach your heart?"

"We're curious too."

Could it really be called a weak weapon?

Rather, being the weakest in the world,

the most dangerous and,

the saddest weapon of all.

After the Gate incident, there were countless people who had died, and countless moments when they had to fight monsters with nothing more than mundane swords and spears.

There must have been as many broken weapons as there were people who died.

How many moments did powerless people have to fight with powerless weapons?

How many people fell without even a weapon in hand?

As if all those weapons were combined and refined, the sword of resentment exuded a dangerous aura.

The moment that sword collided with Alsbringer.

Clang! -

"Ugh…!"

I felt indescribable pain.

Not from the flesh, but from the soul.

It was precisely the same kind of pain I felt when the vengeful spirits tried to swallow me and entered my soul.

The mere collision of the swords brought on an unbearable spiritual pain and fear that felt like my brain would be torn apart.

Sweating coldly, I retreated, and she smiled at me.

It wasn't a weapon like the Void Sword, where one misstep meant death.

However, the eerie power within that sword caused a chilling pain in my body without even touching me.

It was the same kind of pain I felt when my soul was almost swallowed.

The fear and pain I never wanted to remember again.

That's what I felt with just one exchange of sword strikes.

"Ha… ugh…”

Physical wounds could be regenerated by Tiamata's divine power.

But the pain inflicted on the soul accumulated.

It could not be healed.

If the Void Sword could kill me at any moment, that weapon was one that slowly whittled me down.

Not as sharp, but it attacked another part of me.

When it entered my body, I had experienced unconsciousness several times.

Although not as powerful as the Void Sword, a massive gap emerged when my mind wavered.

- Kwaang!

- Kkiaaak!

The broken sword couldn't pierce my Aura Armor, but the powerful impact and the horrifying sound it emitted pierced my brain, threatening to tear my soul apart.

- Jjeok!

“Ku… euk!”

Ellen's body was not only a weapon but also a lethal instrument itself.

Even without a weapon, she could tear monsters apart with her bare hands.

Hadn't the situation actually worsened, allowing her to perform both physical and spiritual attacks?

Hadn't stealing the divine artifacts only led her to find an even more dangerous weapon?

Excuses were pathetic.

The future had already changed.

Luna had given all the help she could.

What mattered was that although she had found another weapon, she hadn't found another shield.

That was crucial.

“O flame.”

- Kururung!

With the will-infused incantation, a massive wave of fire erupted from the Flame of Tuesday, causing a huge explosion beneath Ellen's feet as she charged towards me.

- Kwakang!

However, as if she had known about the flames even before they appeared, Ellen evaded and lunged at me simultaneously.

The explosion of water vapor created by the evaporating water was meant to obstruct her view, but her heightened reflexes remained unchanged.

As if she already knew without seeing, she charged through the steam, aiming straight for me.

- Kakang!

“Euk…!”

Just by blocking the sword, it felt as if my mind was being torn apart.

In a split second.

My unwavering spirit was disrupted.

The Aura within Tiamata and the Aura Armor protecting my body wavered.

Just for a brief moment.

“…!”

- Squeak!

But in that short gap, the broken sword pushed out the protective aura and cut into half of my neck.

Thankfully, my wavering spirit lasted only for a brief moment.

- Bang!

I managed to create some distance by kicking Ellen away as she attempted to land the finishing blow.

Tiamata healed my bleeding neck.

If the cut had been any deeper, I would have died.

No, it seemed like the cut was deep enough to have severed an artery.

That sword disrupted my will. Even if just for a moment, I was rendered powerless.

If it hadn't been for the special training in Rezaira, my spirit might have been shattered at the first clash with that sword.

No, I wouldn't have even made it this far, devoured by those vengeful spirits instead.

My fingertips trembled.

Dangerous in a different way than the Void Sword.

That broken sword attacked me directly.

The longer the battle lasted, the more my mind would deteriorate.

Once I lost consciousness, it would all be over.

- Kadeuk! Kang! Kaang!

As the onslaught continued, I felt a pain that seemed to tear my soul apart throughout my entire body.

Beyond the physical limitations of the broken sword, it deflected and countered all my attacks.

“Heuk… Heu… Heu-eok…”

After dozens of exchanges, I finally realized.

The problem wasn't the Void Sword.

It wasn't the Sun Cloak.

It wasn't even the broken sword.

We had crossed swords multiple times.

For days, weeks, months.

There were times when we spent entire nights fighting.

Although Ellen's body was controlled by vengeful spirits, I was ultimately facing Ellen.

She had no will of her own, but she fought in Ellen's style.

That was the problem.

The fight from my dreams was reenacted.

I had learned the sword from Ellen.

Therefore, Ellen not only knew everything about me when it came to the sword, but she was always ahead of me.

How to slash.

How to stab.

How to measure distance and close it.

How to use angles.

How to utilize joint techniques.

How to use counters.

How to counter a counter.

I learned all of this from Ellen.

Of course, Ellen, who had taught me all of this, was incomparably better at everything than I was.

Now, I had to fight the person who had taught me everything.

Without surpassing my master, I had to fight against her.

Even though she held a broken sword.

Even with a divine weapon, I couldn't win.

-Click!

Suddenly, Ellen charged and struck her sword directly downward from above.

As I tried to deflect the sword diagonally, at that moment.

-Swoosh!

“Ugh… Ah!”

I was hit by her knee, which she raised while maintaining the same speed as her charge, and I was sent flying into the sky.

I rolled several times on the ground while feeling the agony of my innards being crushed.

As I landed and rolled several times in a puddle, I barely managed to get back on my feet.

She feigned a downward strike, drawing my gaze upward, but in reality, she didn't put any strength into the sword at all.

She read everything about me.

She knew my weaknesses all too well.

Ellen, having taught me everything, couldn't lose to me even if she wanted to.

Ellen Artorius was my arch-nemesis.

As a result of learning the sword from Ellen, I quickly grew stronger. I learned how to fight, and thus, my skills were no longer inferior to anyone.

However, because of this, I became someone who could never defeat Ellen.

It was similar to the old days.

I kept getting hit, falling, and rolling.

But I didn't feel any nostalgia.

I wasn't dead because of Tiamata's divine power.

I should have died several times by now.

I could only recover because the injuries weren't absolutely fatal.

And now, an unbearable mental pain was accumulating.

My vision blurred, and I felt like I was about to lose consciousness.

Even channeling magic through my entire body was becoming increasingly difficult.

Despite having come this far.

Without Lament and Lapelt.

Am I still losing?

Can't I win even after all this?

Or am I just weak?

Then how?

What should I have done?

I thought I had done everything I could on my own.

The pain accumulating in my mind weakened me.

Negative and self-destructive thoughts rose up. I knew that these thoughts were forcibly induced by the whispers of the vengeful spirits.

An urge to give up everything and let go welled up within me.

If there were no broken swords.

Then what?

Would it be better?

If she held a truly ordinary sword instead of that grotesque one.

No, if she had no weapon at all, would anything change?

It was a fight against someone who knew everything about me.

Now, it felt like I would lose even if Ellen fought with her bare hands.

No, without the penalty of that broken weapon, I felt like I would be defeated even more overwhelmingly.

There was no reason for my opponent to watch such a mindset of a loser rise up.

Lightly, as if leaping, Ellen charged at me.

I raised my sword to block her charge, but I already knew as I held the sword.

I wouldn't be able to stop her this time either.

My spirit was broken.

Certainty of victory couldn't guarantee victory.

However.

Certainty of defeat.

That would surely bring about defeat.

In the midst of the pain that once again enveloped my soul, as Ellen struck my listlessly raised sword.

At the same time as I was completely disarmed, Tiamata left my hand.

-Splash!

The moment Ellen swooped down on me, the water in the puddle spread in all directions, creating a rough spray.

Was I going to die?

I lost my grip on the sword, and Ellen pounced on me, crushing me underneath her.

My entire body was entangled and crushed, leaving no chance to escape.

I knew it.

It was simple.

I had fallen for this several times before.

While charging and deflecting her sword, she would send her whole body flying at me, crushing me beneath her.

Looking down at me from above.

Aiming her sword at my neck.

Always.

"You're dead."

Yes.

Always.

Like this.

She had said.

CHAPTER 670

What I heard was unmistakably Ellen's voice.

I couldn't help but be surprised.

And it seemed the same was true for my opponent.

With lifeless eyes wide open, it shook as it aimed its sword at my throat.

It was something we had done many times before.

Although Ellen's will was absent, it was as if we were fighting in Ellen's style.

After numerous habitual battles, instead of thrusting the sword into my throat, Ellen stopped.

I had always been defeated.

Ellen had always won.

Just as it had become a habit for me to lose to Ellen, it had become a habit for Ellen to win against me.

So that habit of stopping at the last moment carried over.

Even those familiar words involuntarily escaped my lips.

"Uh… Ugh… Ugh…! Hic! Hic!"

Tears that couldn't be contained flowed from Ellen's lifeless eyes.

Tears mixed with rainwater streamed down endlessly.

The one who shouldn't cry was crying.

These were not tears of bitterness or anger.

They were simply tears of sadness.

"Ellen…?"

"Hic…! Ugh! Ah, ah… Uh…”

I didn't know what was happening.

However, I could sense the violent struggle within the silence.

Ellen hadn't disappeared completely.

Somewhere inside, Ellen was still there.

Yes.

Luna had said she could bring Ellen back.

Although I didn't actually borrow Luna's power, it meant I could recover Ellen.

And from the beginning, it had said it could bring Ellen back as well.

Ellen hadn't vanished.

I was just too weak.

I was so weak that I couldn't recover Ellen.

Luna could bring Ellen back, and it could return Ellen on its own.

I just couldn't find the way.

Ellen could be restored completely, and Ellen was still somewhere inside it.

Biting my lip, I tried to do something, but the sight of Ellen sobbing helplessly told me it was painful.

A wave of pale energy erupted from Ellen's body.

"Gh… ugh…!"

Clutching its head,

"Hu… Hic… Hu… Uh… Ahhhhhhh!"

With a roar like a lost soul and a shockwave that could tear apart not only the surrounding earth but my body as well, I was swept away for dozens of meters.

Barely managing to stand after being thrown back, Ellen clutched her head amidst the torrent that seemed to pour down.

A tremor like an earthquake resounded as something erupted from her body.

"I'll kill… Kill… Must kill… You too… The hero too… Everything you love. Everything precious to you… Must be taken away… That's… Fair… That's the only way…"

Holding a broken sword, she glared at me with a bizarre appearance as vengeful spirits emanated from her body.

I couldn't tell if her condition was bad or good.

If her condition worsened, would that be good for me?

I didn't know if the torrent of vengeful spirits surging from Ellen's body was because they were leaving, or if they were going berserk.

However, the rough gray torrent erupting from the broken sword certainly told me that not only was it dangerous for herself but also for me.

Approaching carelessly might have killed me.

But there was a strong conviction that now was my only chance.

It was clear.

The method to repel that thing.

I didn't know.

The method to kill that thing.

I didn't know.

But there was one thing I did know.

Having been consumed by it, I learned one thing while my soul was being attacked by the strange power of the sword it wielded.

It could kill a living being, but it couldn't kill a soul.

It could possess a body, but it couldn't kill the soul's original owner.

If it could, it would have killed my soul the moment it possessed me from the beginning.

The fact that it couldn't meant that, although it was a collection of souls, it could never kill or eliminate a soul.

I, who was swallowed by it and yet not killed, was the proof.

The fact that Ellen's soul still remained somewhere out there proved it.

So.

I went.

-Krrr!

Facing the thing that rushed at me, clad in a tumult of vengeful spirits.

I didn't back away, but instead approached it.

-Kwadddddduk!

Not only attacking my mind, but I felt a tremendous physical pressure from the colliding swords.

-Krrr!

The raindrops pouring down in the shockwave were pushed away by the sheer physical force, never reaching us.

From the broken sword that collided with Tiamata, a fierce flame erupted as the pressure of the surging spirits and Tiamata's divine power clashed.

I didn't know if it was the flame of the spirits being burned away or a physical flame.

The flames of vengeance engulfed me, and my sanity seemed to fly away from the pain that felt like it could tear my brain apart.

In the turbulence of vengeful spirits, it tried to kill me somehow, as if squeezing out the last flame.

The pain that felt like my soul was being torn apart and the otherworldly pain trying to rip my heart apart both loomed.

But.

I knew the pain could weaken my soul, but it couldn't kill me.

The Void Sword could cut my flesh.

The dark sword of resentment could attack my soul.

But it could never kill my soul.

I just had to not crumble in the pain and fear.

-Kadddddduk!

I knew.

I couldn't win.

I had never won, not even once.

In the days when I learned the sword from Ellen, who knew nothing, hiding the fact that I was the Demon King, it had always been like that.

I didn't learn the sword to fight and win against Ellen someday.

But in the end, we ended up fighting like this.

Whenever Ellen was serious, losing miserably was my fate.

Defeat was all I had.

But it wasn't always the same defeat.

Collapsing in one round, later in two rounds, three rounds, four rounds.

At some point, I could even fight for about ten minutes.

'It's hard.'

Once I got Alsbringer, Ellen had even said those words, exhausted from facing me.

I always lost.

I always fell.

But I was a loser who progressed.

Knowing I couldn't win, I clenched my teeth and tried to win anyway.

I didn't become strong to fight Ellen, but I tried for the things that would happen someday.

—---

I lost to you all my life.

-Krrr!

As I faced Ellen's gaze, filled with hatred and rage, trying to push my sword away in the midst of the turbulent spirits and aiming for my neck.

I said.

"Just once……”

Since the Gate Incident, for the first time, tears that had never been shed until now.

"Only."

In the end, I couldn't hold back any longer.

"Really, just once…"

I knew that tears wouldn't change anything, but still, I cried.

"Even if it's only once."

I was so desperate.

So helpless.

Tears streamed down my face as they were swept away in the raging torrent of vengeful souls, in the midst of a soul-rending storm.

"Can't I… win… just once?"

Just once.

For this crucial moment, I wished for victory.

I could lose to you for the rest of my life, as long as I won now.

Because if I lost now,

I wouldn't have any chances to lose to you in the future.

Because I was willing to spend the rest of my life being defeated by you, just like in the days of the temple.

"So…"

That eternity.

That endless time would be enough if I could just get it back.

I pleaded with my own self-suggestion.

My own word magic.

Just this once.

Only once.

"I… will…”

For this moment alone.

"I… will… defeat you."

No matter what happened.

"I will win."

Kwarrururung!

"Ahh… ugh… uhh… aaaaaaah!"

As it reached some kind of limit, it began to release power wildly, its actions becoming more and more erratic.

Bang!

Instead of blocking the upward swing of the sword, I stepped back to avoid it.

No matter what power was imbued in a weapon, there was always an absolute limit.

The broken sword.

It had its limitations.

This time, I deflected the thrust of the sword that lunged towards me.

Fighting with Ellen's senses, it was clear that the thing controlling her body was feeling confused.

It had become dull.

Ellen Artorious knew my swordsmanship better than anyone else in the world.

But, in the end,

That's why,

The person who knew Ellen's swordsmanship the best in the world,

Was also me.

As I deflected the sword that was aimed at me, she tried her best to target my neck this time.

I dodged the swing aimed at my neck after my sword was pushed aside.

Lowering my stance, I avoided the knee that was thrust upwards towards my face.

Her twisted face, filled with confusion, anger, and despair, was just inches away from me.

"Uh… ugh… ugh!"

The sword pierced through pain and despair.

But knowing that this gap would not come again, I took the hit.

Thud!

"…!"

I did not block the sword that pierced my heart.

An eerie pain shot through my brain, but this level of pain was nothing compared to the pressure on my soul at this moment.

Instead, I pulled.

I pulled the arm that had stabbed me.

Thump!

I grabbed her neck.

"Aaaaaaaaah!"

Kurururung!

There was no escape.

I would gladly be stabbed in the heart countless times for a single victory.

Dozens, hundreds, even thousands of times.

I could do anything, I had done everything to get her back.

I could endure so much more than this.

The torrent of vengeful souls exerted physical force on my body, but my body regenerated as it shattered.

As long as she didn't kill me in one blow, I would regenerate forever.

I still had the divine relic, so I could do it.

For a single victory.

For just one opportunity.

I had endured this moment of weakness.

Without sacrificing Luna.

Without sacrificing myself.

I had clenched my teeth and let go of countless opportunities, not knowing if this moment would ever come.

It had to be done now, or never.

—---

Reaching towards the creature that flailed about, as if to free itself from the grip on its neck.

Towards Ellen.

I had only been accumulating everything up until this point by killing monsters.

All of the achievement points I hadn't used, even the tiniest bit, for this moment.

I used them now.

To get you back.

And perhaps.

This would be the last time.

[Using all 287,620 achievement points.]

I perform a 'revision.'

"Ugh… uh… ha… aaaaah!"

From now on, there was no need for power like word magic.

No need for power like self-suggestion.

These powers could disappear after this last use, for all I cared.

Because they were no longer necessary.

More than any other time.

More than any other moment.

With the most intense desperation.

With the most powerful intention.

I wish (self-suggestion)

I command (word magic)

With these words.

"Disappear!"

CHAPTER 671

Rumble

Countless events were taking place on the battlefield, and anomalies continued to occur in the heart of Diane, where the otherworldly dragon had appeared.

However, very few people could witness these anomalies firsthand.

Whoosh

A torrential downpour obscured the scene, and a massive cloud of steam, caused by explosions, also hid it from the people's eyes.

Even without that, it would have been impossible for the alliance forces to focus on that area.

Battles with the remaining monsters were happening, and the frenzied immortals indiscriminately slaughtered both the alliance forces and monsters, causing tremendous chaos.

As a result, no one was watching what was happening deep within Diane.

But suddenly, a swirling white torrent shot up into the sky and then subsided.

Yet, the anomaly happened again.

A massive cloud appeared.

It was a dark, thick cloud with a color similar to that of storm clouds scattering heavy rain.

However, it was too close to the ground to be considered a cloud.

And within that cloud, despairing human faces appeared and disappeared continuously, writhing as if alive.

Very few people knew that it was a collection of souls of those who had died so far.

Still.

Wail

The ominous, strange, and sorrowful wails emitted by the massive cloud whispered into the ears of everyone on the battlefield.

Some people unknowingly shed tears due to the despair embedded in those sounds.

Right below the giant cloud.

Whoosh

There was a man holding a dazed woman in the pouring rain.

"Ah…”

The man gazed up at the sky with a blank, despairing expression as rain fell on his face.

He had done everything he could.

In the end, he managed to regain what he had lost.

But it wasn't a complete success.

The curse he had shouted, hoping for the spirits to vanish, only brought half the success.

The curse disappeared from Ellen Artorius's body.

But it did not vanish from the world.

It still had a physical form and wailed eerily.

It could find another body to dwell in next or bring about the destruction of everything by scattering curses throughout the world.

The Demon King held the girl he had finally regained in his arms, looking up at the sky with a hardened expression.

If he couldn't make it disappear, the calamity it caused would continue.

It could dwell in someone else.

Or return to Ellen Artorius's body.

Or even possess the Demon King's physical body.

Poof!

Suddenly, someone appeared next to the Demon King.

"An extraordinary event has occurred."

It was an old mage.

He was a vampire named Antirianus.

As always, he wore an expression that suggested he was scheming something sinister.

Though they had achieved their first victory, the girl had fainted, and the Demon King had no energy left.

The Demon King, sitting and embracing the precious girl, pointed shakily at the sky.

Even that gesture was weak.

"Will you be alright?"

"…"

"I don't know what will happen next."

"…"

The Demon King raised his head with difficulty and looked at the old vampire, who

wore an expression of unbearable delight.

Unable to muster the strength to speak, the Demon King's vision began to blur.

"At last, you succeeded in reclaiming everything. At this moment when you possess it all, I want to relish the exhilaration of twisting your neck without necessarily having to swallow that thing."

"…"

Intense despair.

The old vampire enjoyed such things.

"But even now, if I were to swallow that thing, wouldn't I naturally try to kill you as you are now?"

The Demon King proposed to the old vampire.

When he transferred the spirit to Ellen Artorius, and when he learned that it was Antirianus who had suggested it.

And when he saw the future in which he himself would die.

The Demon King didn't kill the old vampire, but made a proposal instead.

'I'm going to make you an offer that's hard to refuse.'

'Hehe… How intriguing.'

That irresistible offer was a story that even the old vampire could not help but be surprised by.

'So, what is it?'

At the very end.

Wouldn't you like the chance to become my final adversary and destroy everything I have?

If that thing somehow escaped from Ellen's body and couldn't be completely annihilated.

Before it wreaked havoc on the world, how about you try to consume it?

By becoming my final enemy.

Not lurking on the outskirts of the story, but becoming the ultimate evil in the story, what do you think?

If it wandered around without a host, it would become an even bigger problem.

If it can't be annihilated, someone has to bear it.

So, at the moment when it was driven out of Ellen's body.

Next, someone has to bear it.

'If I were to consume it, what would you do?'

'I'll subdue you somehow and annihilate you. If I can't, I'll imprison you.'

'So you cannot do that to Ellen Artorius, but you'll turn me into that?'

'Exactly.'

'Hehehe. How candid of you.'

'If you don't want to, say so.'

Witnessing the final despair.

Or, creating the final despair with his own hands.

Which one did he desire?

The Demon King made such a proposal to the despair-enjoying vampire.

'Originally, this old one enjoys watching everything from behind, not leading in anything.'

The old vampire didn't enjoy excessively decisive behind-the-scenes actions.

He liked twisting stories, but he didn't enjoy cutting off their lifelines.

He might intervene and make suggestions, but determining the end of the story himself wasn't a hobby.

If there was a happy ending, he would enjoy it.

If a story ended in despair, he would enjoy that too.

He preferred stories that flowed naturally and found their fitting conclusions.

He might add a little commentary, but he wasn't one to insist on a story ending in despair or happiness.

He had always had the opportunity to end this story in despair, but he chose not to, as evidence.

But this time, the situation was different.

'However, as a loyal subject, how can I, Antirianus, refuse my lord's command?'

There was a request not to sit idly by, but to become the final despair.

If he lost the final battle, it would still be a great story.

If he won, it would be overwhelming despair.

The old vampire was not one to refuse such opportunities.

And so, in the end.

At the end of an impossible battle, the Demon King reclaimed the hero.

And his thoughts remained unchanged.

As if commanding to carry out the agreed-upon task, the weak gesture pointed towards the massive cloud of vengeful spirits.

The one who swallowed it would no longer be themselves.

Even Antirianus didn't know what would happen next.

No one could predict the events that would unfold.

-Groooowl

Antirianus gazed up at the massive cloud of vengeful spirits that let out a grotesque howl.

In truth, the elderly vampire might have come to this place even without the Demon King's request.

He was a being that reveled in despair.

How immense must the despair contained within that thing be?

To take it into his body and savor it to the limit.

To truly feel the countless tears of countless individuals as if they were his own.

"How…"

"Could this be…"

"So tempting…"

Thus, Antirianus seemed to be driven mad with ecstasy.

He would likely die from consuming it.

Even knowing he would die from eating it, the mad vampire decided to consume it.

There was no reason not to eat it.

Having lived for far too long to live for the sake of living, seeking twisted pleasure had become his purpose in life.

To lose his life in exchange for tasting it seemed almost too cheap a price.

He would pay even more if needed.

The elderly vampire reached into his chest.

Then, a deep crimson gem revealed itself.

He was willing to die from consuming it.

But he wanted to savor it a bit longer.

Therefore, he had been secretly preparing since he received the proposal.

Preparing to properly consume it.

The red gem was not originally Antirianus's.

It belonged to another vampire, older than Antirianus, who no longer existed.

Others believed he pursued the philosopher's stone, but the truth was different.

It was a gem containing a failed wish, created to give a soul to a certain girl.

This was a vessel to contain a soul.

The wish had failed.

It was a simple truth.

A soul could not be created.

What did not exist, did not exist.

Thus, after completing his long research on the failed wish, he left only the gem behind, accepting the truth he had always known and returned to the void.

A vessel to contain a soul.

A great thing, but at the same time, an utterly useless object.

A miraculous stone that could offer no help to those who needed it most.

That, too, was despair.

The elderly vampire never told the Demon King about the existence of the stone.

He couldn't grant a simple resolution, like sealing away the thing or making it vanish from the world, with this stone.

Just as he didn't actively interfere.

He didn't like providing crucial help either.

But now, it was necessary.

To properly seize it.

To become the ultimate despair.

The Demon King had requested it, so he intended to do his best to become the greatest despair.

"Come… lost souls…”

The crimson gem floated in the air above the elderly vampire's right hand.

"I want to feast upon your despair."

-Woooong!

The crimson gem emitted light, and dozens of circles began to appear around it.

A grand-scale soul absorption took place.

It was something the elderly vampire had never attempted before.

It didn't matter if it couldn't withstand the process and shattered.

If that happened, he would simply absorb it with his bare body.

-Groooowl!

The massive cloud of vengeful spirits seemed to react, gradually beginning to move.

No.

Rather than being led, it was more accurate to say:

Keuuuuuuuuuuuuh!

They were being dragged.

As if being forcibly pulled by something, the cloud of resentful souls was drawn into the crimson gem.

Kiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!

The scream-like wailing clearly showed that the cloud of souls was resisting the pull.

However, the gem that was made to contain souls began to devour the cloud of resentful souls as if swallowing them whole.

Kurururururuu!

Despite the souls' raging torrent resisting, the vessel of souls sucked them in violently like the eye of a storm.

As it absorbed them, the crimson gem grew increasingly murky, but it continued to swallow the cloud of souls that enveloped the area, seemingly without limit.

"Oh… Maximilia… How did you create such a magnificent thing!"

The elder vampire cried out the name of the vampire who created this, as the soul stone began to devour all the souls without end.

How much time had passed?

The razor-sharp wind that shattered the ground and tore through the air gradually subsided.

In the middle of it all, an old man holding a red gem stood quietly.

Uuuuuuuuuuuung!

However, the gem was in turmoil.

Due to containing too many souls, it seemed as if it would shatter at any moment.

It was a magnificent object, but it was only natural that it couldn't withstand the pressure.

The elder vampire simply…

Gulp!

Swallowed the stone.

"Heh."

"Heh heh."

"Hee… Hee hic. Hic…"

"Uhuhuhuhuhuhu! Uhuhuhuhuhu!"

The half-mad vampire burst into laughter.

Tears filled with sadness welled up in Antirianus' eyes.

With a sickeningly joyful smile on his face…

"How… How can there be so many sad things…?"

"How can there be so many in this world…?"

The elder vampire laughed for a long time.

As if his soul had left his body due to the overwhelmingly sweet despair, the vampire's expression soon turned cold and bitter.

"Ah."

"To feed…"

"There was something else I needed to do first…"

With a bizarre voice that overlapped and echoed, the existence of Antirianus, who had swallowed the stone of souls, began to fade away.

However, this time was different.

Until now, it had merely taken the place of the physical host.

But in this case, they would become one.

Antirianus' will and the will of the souls would merge.

The elder vampire would assimilate and dissolve with the souls.

He was both Antirianus and the collective embodiment of the despairing souls.

Antirianus looked at the Demon King, who was still crouching, and the girl in his embrace.

There was no final battle.

The Demon King had fainted.

He had achieved an impossible victory and exhausted all his strength.

So, it was only natural.

The monster, no longer a vampire nor a collection of souls but something else entirely, quietly gazed at the Demon King who, even unconscious, desperately clung to the girl he had saved.

Ssoaaaaaaaaaaa

In the rain pouring down like despair, the monster quietly spoke towards the unconscious Demon King.

"I assume you didn't wish for something like this."

"Killing you when you can't put up any resistance is no fun. I will return later."

"Maybe you envisioned a scenario where I would appear to kill you when you are fully prepared."

"But… that's not the case."

"I enjoy stories that are so despairing they're great, and stories that are so hopeful they're sacred."

"Of course, I also like stories that are so dreadful they're empty."

The monster slowly approached the fallen Demon King.

There was only one dilemma.

Whether to kill the Demon King first or the hero he loved.

In any case, both would die an empty death at the hands of the monster, having reached the end of everything on this spot.

A miserable and pathetic ending would be bestowed upon them.

To put an end to the story that had gone beyond great despair and great hope and ended so emptily.

Since it was the Demon King's choice, he had to endure it.

Thinking so, a pale resentment arose in the monster's hand when…

"…Hmm."

The monster, about to approach, sensed something and retreated.

Bang!

Then something blocked the space between the Demon King, the hero, and the monster.

A gigantic dark sword pierced the ground between them and disappeared like a

mirage.

The monster turned its gaze to where the sword had come from.

There, a single ghost clad in bloodied armor, whose blood had been turned so much that it couldn't be known, stood.

The ghost's right arm burned with a strange darkness.

In the ghost's right hand was the dark sword made of darkness, which had blocked the space between the monster and the Demon King.

The ghost standing before the monster muttered in a trembling voice.

"I still don't know… what the answer is."

"But…"

"I think I know the most definite wrong answer…"

"Here…"

"Here, these two dying…"

"That, at least, seems to be the most definite wrong answer…"

"Since I don't know the answer."

"As much as the definite wrong answers."

"As much as the worst possible endings."

"I have to stop it."

"I don't know who you are."

"I don't know what you are."

"I don't know what you want."

"But step back."

Rumble!

The dark sword suddenly appeared in the ghost's right hand and aimed at the monster.

The human-turned-ghost said,

"These two must not die here."

Upon seeing this, the vampire-turned-monster cocked its head.

"Who might you be, suddenly appearing before me?"

Regrettably, the monster didn't know who the ghost was.

He was still too small a person for anyone to remember.

But there was no need for an explanation.

Knowing that his name was too small to be remembered by history,

He no longer mentioned his name.

"You don't need to know."

And he wasn't sad about it.

CHAPTER 672

Only a handful of people could see in detail what was happening deep within the battlefield.

Among those who were close to the heart of the battle was Ludwig.

He slashed through monsters in the rain, cutting and cutting his way through them.

As he built a mountain of monster corpses while crossing the battlefield, Ludwig also witnessed the strange occurrences on the field.

The dragon that suddenly appeared seemed to contain the universe within its body.

The moment Ludwig saw the dragon destroy a Titan up close, he, like the others, felt despair.

However, before that monster could wipe out the entire allied forces with its overwhelming destruction, Ellen brought it down in a single blow.

And soon, Ludwig witnessed the beginning of the battle between the Demon King and the hero.

It was a series of incomprehensible events.

Although the battle between the Demon King and the hero was natural to the people, it was something that should not have happened from Ludwig's perspective.

The two fought.

Ludwig watched from afar, but even just felling the monsters pouring from all directions was challenging.

The fight between the Demon King and the hero.

However, what was even more unbearable was what happened next.

The Immortal suddenly began indiscriminately killing not only monsters but also the soldiers of the allied forces.

The screams and resentful cries from all over the battlefield told of this.

Ludwig knew exactly what this meant.

Either Christina, who should have controlled the Immortal, had gone mad, or she had died.

Ludwig did not know how the situation would unfold.

What was important was that the evil monster had appeared but then vanished.

With all the warp gates destroyed, all that remained was to deal with the remaining monsters, and humanity's last enemy had become the Immortal.

—---

The Immortals left the battlefield.

And as it re-entered, everyone saw it trying to kill the Demon King who was fighting for humanity.

Ludwig saw that scene as well.

The Demon King lured the Immortals while turning Diane into a wasteland.

Ludwig saw the Demon King fighting for humanity more desperately and in a more dangerous place than anyone else.

Even when humanity's weapons tried to kill him, he continued to fight for them.

Could the Demon King be forgiven?

Could the Demon King avoid paying the price?

Such concerns were not possible.

From the moment the Immortals began slaughtering the allied forces, people would

think that the Immortals' actions were the Emperor's orders.

All the causes were, in fact, Christina, but people didn't even know of Christina's existence.

Therefore, all the responsibility and arrows of sin would be directed at the Emperor.

The Empire was not in danger.

The Empire would not disappear when this war ended.

The Empire had already vanished.

When the Immortals disappeared irresponsibly, and now that their swords were aimed at the allied forces, the Empire ceased to exist.

Everyone in the allied forces had already seen the Demon King fighting for humanity, even if the rest of the world didn't know.

Everyone saw him trying to kill monsters by using the crisis of being hunted by the Immortals.

He couldn't even feel betrayed as he watched Scarlett appear all over the battlefield, neutralizing the Immortal.

Who knew what horrors would have happened if it weren't for that act of defiance?

To Ludwig, Scarlett's betrayal was actually a blessing.

The Empire was gone.

The war was over.

In this world, there was a need for someone to take up the next baton, and that person was the Demon King.

But if the Demon King were to die in this place.

In just one day, the Demon King had transformed from humanity's enemy to its savior. If he were to die here, humanity would once again be plunged into chaos.

It didn't matter if the being was good or evil.

Without someone to hold the baton, humanity would be torn apart.

If the Demon King were to die in this place.

To whom would the allied forces pledge their loyalty, and how would they proceed?

It wasn't a matter of whether the Empire or the Demon King was right.

The problem was the division between those who believed in the Empire and those who believed in the Demon King.

If the Demon King died, that rift would intensify.

Someone had to ensure everyone's safety, even in the name of oppression.

The price shouldn't be paid by the Demon King alone.

The responsibility of not stopping Christina.

The responsibility of not persuading her.

That's why Ludwig himself had to take responsibility for this moment when the Immortals were slaughtering the allied forces.

No.

In truth, it didn't matter.

Ludwig saw, as he cut through monsters and vaulted over them.

The Demon King's desperate struggle.

The sight of him, who was using some unknown power, trying to save Ellen.

What he had tried to protect, what he had tried to regain.

He saw how it had all been ultimately restored to him.

Ludwig could not protect her.

He couldn't persuade her either.

But the Demon King, in his desperate battle that could be seen even from a distance, succeeded in retrieving Ellen from something unknown.

That victory.

The Demon King who succeeded in protecting something after that desperate battle.

Reinhardt.

He couldn't leave the victory of the Demon King, who had reached something he himself couldn't do, to end in a futile death.

He had seen it already.

He had said that he must pay the price.

He had said that he must bear the responsibility, without knowing anything about Reinhardt.

He didn't understand what Reinhardt had been dealing with, as he watched him being chased by the Immortals from afar.

He still couldn't know everything.

He didn't know what had happened or what was going to happen.

But this victory.

Reinhardt's victory shouldn't be reduced to nothing in the midst of miserable futility.

Finding the right answer was impossible, and that thought hadn't changed.

He couldn't think that the arrival of the Demon King's world was truly the right thing.

However.

The Demon King dying in this place.

And Ellen, who the Demon King had somehow managed to protect, dying.

That was the wrong answer.

It was something that shouldn't happen.

Because the path he had intended to take was also one of the worst wrong answers, Ludwig no longer had the right to demand someone else to pay the price of the wrong answer.

Then, the minimum good.

In the end, he returned to his original mindset.

He had to fight for someone's life.

Not for the death of something.

Not for the price of sin.

In the end, he fought for life.

-Kkwa-Ga-Ga-Gang!

That's why Ludwig fought.

No one would remember it.

Even those who were saved wouldn't remember.

The final battle.

"What a strange power."

A strange gray light flickered in the eyes of the old mage, whose identity was unknown.

Ludwig could tell that the old mage had taken away something that had burst out of

Ellen's body.

He had thought the old man might be Reinhardt's subordinate, but he actually intended to kill Reinhardt

With a mere outstretched hand, the old mage blocked the massive dark sword that Ludwig swung.

The black magic-infused sword, which had been tearing through monsters' flesh until now, was blocked all too easily.

"That right arm doesn't seem to be yours."

The old mage pointed at Ludwig's right arm, burning with darkness.

"I feel like I've heard your story somewhere before…"

The old mage tilted his head.

"Well, I can't remember it clearly. It's a common thing for an old man like me…"

Although he couldn't explain it properly, the old monster he faced was an unpleasant presence.

"But in the end, I was disappointed that no one was in my way. Perhaps it's for the best."

The old monster was satisfied with the fact that someone had eventually stood in his way, despite the emptiness he felt.

So, he had no intention of killing the Demon King before defeating Ludwig.

That was the story, after all.

He still didn't like ruining the story with petty tricks.

There was a final enemy.

Therefore, overcoming each other first was beautiful.

"Ugh… Ack…”

Although he tried to approach the two, Ludwig had already crossed the line several times.

Like Reinhardt, who reached his limit and collapsed, Ludwig was already at his limit as well.

Furthermore, Ludwig didn't gain his strength through normal means.

-Grrrr!

"Ugh… Argh!"

The torrent of black magic gushing from his right arm was not only uncontrollable, but the pain engulfing his whole body was also invading Ludwig's consciousness.

He had come this far after a fierce battle.

So, by the time he arrived here, Ludwig's stamina was nearly depleted.

The Demon King had a healing method called Tiamata, but Ludwig had nothing like that. Moreover, Ludwig's condition couldn't be healed with holy power.

He couldn't control the rampaging power of his right arm properly.

He didn't know who the enemy was, but the situation was at its worst, even though he had to face the most powerful enemy he had encountered so far.

The old mage, watching Ludwig's agony, quietly stretched out his right hand.

"Young man…”

-Zzzzzzz

"Great price follows easily acquired power."

He lightly swung his hand towards Ludwig, which he had lowered towards the soaked ground.

Despite being more than twenty meters apart, Ludwig saw a rift in space.

The blade of wind created by compressing the atmosphere was swung towards Ludwig.

"...!"

-Kwakakang!

"Kuh!"

The mage, who sent Ludwig flying with just a swing of his hand, was already at Ludwig's nose in the next moment with a short-range spatial leap.

-Uwooooo!

From the mage's right hand, an eerie grayish storm, not made of mana, was raging.

-Kwarrrr!

The torrent of vengeful spirits engulfed Ludwig.

"Ugh... Uh... Huhuhuk!"

He was invaded by spiritual pain, not physical torment.

Ludwig, who had become accustomed to pain through the chimera procedure, couldn't help but scream at the unfamiliar pain.

Swallowed by the torrent and rolling across the ground, Ludwig couldn't even stand up properly as he trembled.

He didn't know what it was, but the Demon King had certainly fought something like this.

Thus, there was no way Ludwig could not realize that he was now feeling the pain that the Demon King had felt.

Beyond the pain, an innate fear surged forth.

It wasn't just the level of pain and suffering; it was a sensation as if his soul was becoming sick.

Despair filled his mind.

I can't do it.

How can someone like me?

This is not my place.

Such thoughts filled his brain.

The Demon King, lying there defeated.

Did Reinhardt fight something like this?

How could the Demon King fight something like that?

What was even stranger was the monster before him.

Why did it seem so happy, harboring such a thing inside its body?

For the first time in his life, he experienced an unfamiliar pain.

And fear.

The rising sense of despair.

The monster approached the trembling Ludwig with a sinister smile.

"Isn't it more beautiful, a power that cannot kill someone?"

"Ugh…"

"I enjoy the expressions made by broken-hearted humans."

He gritted his teeth, trying not to back away, but Ludwig unknowingly stepped back, afraid of the pain he had just felt.

-Splash

Trembling with fear, Ludwig soon stumbled and fell into a puddle, sitting in the water.

"Ugh… ugh…”

"Since I cannot witness the despair I truly wanted to see, how about you show me that expression instead?"

He couldn't make an expression while unconscious.

How much despair would he feel?

How much pain would he suffer?

It was impossible to know.

So the monster would extract that expression from the nameless someone who had appeared to protect him.

Fear crept over Ludwig's entire body.

The first time experiencing such pain.

The first time encountering such a being.

A creature worthy of being called a true monster approached, not to bring death, but to deliver pain and fear.

Yet, he could not back down.

He mustered strength he didn't have.

Supporting himself on his trembling legs.

He stood up.

"Ugh!"

Biting his lip until it bled, he offset the pain of his soul with physical pain.

Taking a step forward, Ludwig swung his sword of darkness.

-Clang!

The greatsword was blocked by the barrier the monster had spread.

If once wouldn't work, then twice.

-Clang! Clang!

And if that didn't work, then thrice.

-Screech!

The barrier shattered, but in that moment, the monster was already preparing its next barrier.

What on earth was this thing before him?

How could it possess such power?

Or had he become too weak?

The old mage waved his hand.

"How about this?"

-Rumble, rumble, rumble!

"…!"

The ground trembled as chunks of earth began clinging to Ludwig's body.

“…What!"

And then, they tightened around him as if to shatter his body.

-Rumble, rumble, rumble!

Pieces of the torn earth enveloped Ludwig's body, compressing him without end.

Soon, the rocks became transparent, gradually turning into crystal.

Trapped inside a prison of crystal, Ludwig's eyes bulged.

An ordinary human would have been crushed by the pressure.

However, Ludwig was far from ordinary.

Though he had no noteworthy title or reputation.

He didn't belong to the realm of the ordinary.

With a crack, fissures appeared in the crystalline prison that held Ludwig, soon causing a massive explosion.

"Kwakakang!"

Crystal shards scattered, and Ludwig, who had been trapped within, fell to the ground, gasping for breath.

"Ssaaaaaaaaa"

Drenched and stretched out like a wet rag in the rain, his appearance alone made him a defeated man.

"Hooo…"

However, as if admiring his effort to escape, the monster watched Ludwig, who lay collapsed and gasping for breath, as he somehow tried to stand up.

Once again, Ludwig's hand held the great sword of darkness.

The fight continued.

Ludwig was undoubtedly strong.

The great sword of darkness was a powerful magical weapon in and of itself, threatening enough for the old mage, and could easily destroy any defensive barrier.

It was truly a monstrous power.

However, his opponent was an all too unfamiliar being.

The old monster, who had absorbed even strange powers, was too alien an enemy for Ludwig to face.

Magic that transcended space.

And Ludwig had neither a way to block nor dodge the torrent of vengeful spirits.

The monster did not have to face him.

Ludwig knew that he was merely being toyed with.

He could somehow dodge and shatter the incoming earth spears, explosions, and lightning strikes, but he could not block the torrent of vengeful spirits wielded by the old mage. Just touching them would erode his mind with fear and pain so intense that it felt like his sanity would collapse.

"Kuh… ugh!"

Antirianus delightedly watched Ludwig writhing in pain.

It was the power that the old monster had never desired.

A power that did not kill humans but could break them.

A power that could twist anyone's face in despair, fear, and pain.

Although he had never coveted it until the Demon King suggested it, once he grasped it, it was as if the very power he himself had always desired.

Only Antirianus, the sole being in the world, could use this power joyfully.

His opponent before his eyes was nothing.

The pupils of the trembling opponent were filled with fear from pain.

Antirianus did not know who was in front of him.

However, merely being here meant that he was not an ordinary human or a being with ordinary willpower.

Thus, the monster was curious.

How far could this power break a human?

"Show me, boy."

"Kurururung!"

The torrent of vengeful spirits emitted from Antirianus's grip engulfed Ludwig.

"Kuuuuuuuugh!"

Ludwig, who had collapsed, began to scream as his whole body trembled.

"I wonder what expression one who has been broken and bent, with no will left to stand, would wear… I am curious."

Although it did not kill humans, it could break them to their limits.

Antirianus intended to test the extent of this power.

What a splendid toy to verify the power he possessed.

It would provide good entertainment until the real toy awoke.

"Kurururururung!"

"Kuheuaaaaaaaaaak!"

Like tearing off the legs of an ant before crushing it, Antirianus looked down at Ludwig, who was slumped and convulsing.

And he watched.

To see if he would stand.

If there was any strength left to stand, any mental fortitude.

After one storm had passed, Antirianus saw Ludwig, still on bended knee, struggling to stand on trembling legs.

The dark greatsword still remained in his right hand.

"You're getting up."

"Ugh… ugh…"

Ludwig knew that his opponent was merely toying with him. He also knew that he couldn't win. Nevertheless, he tried to buy time. If the unconscious Demon King were to awaken, the situation might change. He himself might not be capable, but Reinhardt might be. He had always failed, but Reinhardt had always succeeded.

He had to hold on.

Until Reinhardt rose.

It's not that he agreed with the Demon King, but there had to be someone who could find a new answer. And it wasn't him. It was the Demon King. Just like Christina. It was wrong to kill and destroy things solely with malice. In the end, everyone dies, and someone gets sacrificed against their intentions. If such incidents occur regardless of who is in front, if anyone only brings about sacrifices, if there's no right answer for anyone, then at least a being without malice should exist.

He had seen with his own eyes that Reinhardt had no malice. He had to protect him. Running away, fighting, and in the desperate moments of battle, he had seen him fighting to protect even the malice directed at himself.

He had to endure.

Until Reinhardt rose.

He also knew that the monster in front of him was interested in him for the time being. He didn't know what kind of monster it was, or what kind of pain he was going through, but all he had to do was not fall. If he could just get up, if that could change the situation even a little, he had to get up.

Antirianus smiled as he saw the life still remaining in Ludwig's eyes.

That was, perhaps, what the monster loved most in the world.

It didn't matter if his will was extinguished or not. He enjoyed the process.

-Kurururung!

Once again, a torrent of vengeful spirits formed in the monster's right hand.

CHAPTER 673

Swoooosh!

The rain continued to pour down.

Antirianus's expression had already hardened.

"It's happening again."

He silently watched Ludwig, who managed to withstand the onslaught of vengeful spirits once more, staggering to his feet.

The dark flames that once flickered on his right arm had gone out, and saliva absentmindedly dripped from the corner of his mouth. But Ludwig, like someone who wouldn't collapse due to the fact that he couldn't be killed, rose once more.

A normal person would have lost their sanity upon encountering the attack of these vengeful spirits, yet Ludwig endured it.

Even the Demon King had fainted from being attacked by them, but Ludwig gritted his teeth and stood up, fully aware that he was being toyed with.

All he could do was buy time.

Despite knowing that his existence held no greater value than that, he refused to fall.

Could an iron-willed soul truly exist?

Was there such a thing as an unbreakable human?

Once again, the raging torrent of vengeful spirits engulfed Ludwig.

Rumble!

At first, Ludwig had screamed as if he couldn't breathe, but now he no longer let out pain-filled cries.

It wasn't because he was enduring it.

He simply no longer had the strength to scream.

Still, he managed to rise once more.

He was sure to fall this time.

This was no longer amusing for the monster.

If he killed the boy who somehow resisted, it would be a defeat of its own.

He needed to break him and trample him.

Wouldn't it only have to kill the boy once he could no longer rise?

If an unbreakable being existed, he wanted to see it with its own eyes.

If such a being truly existed, he wanted to know.

That had been Antirianus's long-held curiosity.

He had to see if he would break.

If he didn't, it would be astonishing.

If he did, it would confirm the truth that existence is always swallowed up by despair.

So now, it was a defeat for the monster to kill the boy himself.

In that moment, as he watched to see if the boy would rise again…

Swish!

"!"

Crack!

The dark greatsword, piercing through the storm of vengeful spirits, shattered the barrier the monster had created and grazed his right ear.

Antirianus's right ear disappeared, along with the storm of dark magic.

"Ha… ha… ha…"

At the spot where the torrent of vengeful spirits had vanished, a boy sat, gritting his teeth and gasping for breath.

"So you still had that much strength left."

The boy's face contorted with despair as his crucial, desperate, but ultimately single surprise attack failed.

He had waited for the monster to let its guard down, conserving his last ounce of strength.

It must have been his final, desperate ambush.

But it had missed.

The miraculous attack had indeed found an opening, but in the end, it couldn't inflict more than a scratch.

Antirianus smiled at the sight of Ludwig's expression as his one chance evaporated.

The boy hadn't been trying to hold on.

He had been waiting for the right moment.

"What a wonderful expression."

There was no such thing as an unbreakable being.

Didn't that expression say it all?

"Is that right arm your hope?"

Ludwig's deeds were of little importance to Antirianus and thus hadn't reached his ears.

At a glance, the right arm appeared to be transplanted from another being.

Something sinister related to dark magic

Perhaps it was related to the Immortal.

The boy had endured in order to seize a single moment of reversal with that arm, which must mean that the arm was everything to him.

Antirianus waved his hand.

Sharp blades of wind flew through the air.

Swish!

"…!"

All too easily, the foundation of strength that the boy had been desperately clinging to was severed in vain.

"Ugh…!"

Having lost his arm for the second time, Ludwig groaned while gripping his bleeding stump.

There was no more power left to attempt a reversal.

The toy's sting had been removed.

"Now all that remains is pain."

Rumble!

A storm of spirits formed in the monster's hand once more, rushing towards Ludwig.

Since his hope had been broken, he would finally break.

Without the ability to seize a moment of reversal, he had only to enjoy the sight of his despair-filled expression.

But.

Rumble!

"Ugh… ugh…”

Rumble!

"Ugh…”

"…”

"…”

No matter how much time passed.

Ludwig managed to stand up again, albeit staggering.

Holding onto his injured right arm, he struggled and definitely.

Stood up.

Antirianus's expression hardened.

His eyes.

As if to declare that as long as his will remained, he would continue to rise.

He stared at Ludwig's eyes that kept getting up.

The light did not fade.

Even while writhing in agony.

Even though now all he could do was buy time, and he knew he was merely being toyed with.

A worthless enemy.

No, not even an enemy anymore, he kept getting up.

"Why do you keep getting up?"

"You, who are nothing."

"Knowing you can do nothing."

"Without any basis."

"Why do you keep getting up?"

Even though he had no power.

He kept getting up just to buy time.

Did he believe there would be some variable when the Demon King awakened?

Ludwig, battered and barely able to stand on his two legs, spoke.

A boy with fading eyes muttered blankly.

"Because this is all I can do."

"Because I know nothing else."

"I have to do this, at least…"

"I don't regret losing my right arm."

"It wasn't mine to begin with."

"That's right…"

"Getting up even when I'm knocked down."

"That's what I was able to do."

"I was good at nothing but this."

"All I could ever do was this."

"Being stupid and having only stamina was my advantage."

"Always running, always holding a sword. Thinking that if I did something, I'd become something. That's how it was…”

"In the end, I couldn't become anything."

"I could only become something by attaching someone else's arm."

"That's right… I'm nothing."

"I have no power at all."

"But this must be my true self…”

"If you could kill me at any time, but you're keeping me alive because it's fun…”

"Then let me try a little more."

"I'll keep getting up, as long as I can…”

"Play with me a bit longer…”

"I'll keep getting up."

"Because that's the one thing I'm good at, even though I'm nothing."

Terror, despair, and pain battered his body, but he resolved that his will would never break. He was determined to keep getting up, if only to buy time.

For the first time in his life, Antirianus felt an odd emotion.

It was discomfort.

Was there an existence that would not break?

He wanted to see it.

However, when faced with an actual unbreakable human, Antirianus felt an unbearable discomfort.

How could one be so foolish, and yet so persistent?

Knowing full well their own insignificance.

Defying the odds, refusing to fall.

Antirianus felt it.

That one would not fall.

Rather, unconsciousness due to blood loss would come first.

As long as the will was there, he would continue to rise, and when he finally fell due to blood loss, Antirianus would experience something:

An overwhelming sense of defeat.

When he lost consciousness without breaking, he would only be acutely aware that he had failed to destroy the unbreakable human.

The fading light in Ludwig's eyes told him.

It wasn't the collapse of his spirit, but the blood loss that would cause him to lose consciousness.

"You say you are nothing."

Not knowing who stood before him, how could he be so self-deprecating?

"In my immeasurably long life, I have seen many humans - as insignificant as they are great."

"There were those so strong as to be inconceivable."

"And there were those of noble blood who acted more disgracefully than the lowest of creatures."

"I have seen countless despairs."

"And countless hopes."

"All of them, in the end, reduced to the emptiness of inevitable death."

"I have seen many great and insignificant beings."

"But never have I seen someone as insignificant, yet as tenacious, as you."

"Indeed…"

"How can I not call that greatness?"

"Among all the humans I have known, you are the most uniquely great."

"How can I call such a person nothing?"

The boy was not strong enough to surpass the old monster.

But he was utterly unbreakable.

Unbroken by pain that could not kill him.

He just kept rising.

Even knowing he could do nothing, only hoping for what he desired.

Not because it was the right answer, but because the death of the Demon King was an absolute wrong.

He had to do whatever he could, no matter what.

It was the first time Antirianus had faced such determination.

"I have lost," he said, lifting his right hand.

This time, it wasn't a force to torment or cause pain, but a blade of wind.

He had tried to break him, but he would not break.

Acknowledging defeat, he would take the boy's life.

If he would not break, then he would be shattered.

That was the highest compliment and respect Antirianus could give to the nameless

human before him.

—---

-Woosh!

Ludwig looked at the wind blade forming in the monster's right hand.

It had been a hopeless fight.

All he could do was rise, but even that was now meaningless.

The opponent had lost interest in the unyielding enemy and now sought to take his life.

Next would be the fallen Demon King and Ellen.

He didn't even know what was before him.

He didn't know what was happening.

However, in the end, he had tried to change his mind and protect the Demon King, but even that had failed.

Like despair.

Like emptiness.

Swoosh!

The rain.

Fell.

"…”

His life had been a series of failures.

Protecting someone, becoming stronger, everything.

Repeating failures, losing everything, making wrong decisions, and finally, losing his life.

Was it to end like this, a life of a loser?

Was this the only outcome prepared for someone as incompetent and foolish as himself?

Pathetically persistent.

Would it all end like this?

He had confidence that he wouldn't crumble, but not that he wouldn't break, and he had no means to attack the enemy before him.

Could someone like him not dream of victory?

He had done his best.

It was his best, up to this point.

It was sorrowful and infuriating that his best only went this far, but he had done everything he could.

He couldn't ask for more than this.

Wasn't this enough for someone like him?

Considering his status, hadn't he done enough?

The moment he thought that, Ludwig couldn't help but recall a conversation from long ago.

In the rain, he glanced at the unconscious Demon King, and Ellen who had fainted, held by the Demon King in his arms.

He had respected, hated, and decided to kill that being.

But in the end, he had resolved to protect them.

He had definitely heard those words from the Demon King.

Those words had spurred him on, it was no exaggeration.

Was it the night before the Temple Tournament semifinals, at the training ground?

Feeling a sense of defeat, Ludwig had asked Reinhardt.

"Reinhardt, I have a question."

"What is it?"

"Have you ever fought knowing you'd lose?"

“…Yes, I have."

"But you won them all, didn't you?"

The Demon King, who had always fought recklessly, hadn't been hiding his strength but was genuinely weak.

He had hidden his identity but not his power.

He hadn't pretended to be weak; he really was weak.

Insignificant.

Despite that, he had always fought impossible battles.

He had entered the battles knowing he would lose.

But he had always won.

"How do you think that was possible?"

Ludwig had been curious.

Why fight when you knew you'd lose?

And how on earth had he won?

"You have to believe."

"Believe?"

"Yes."

He had definitely heard those words.

"Even if I'm going to lose, even if I have no choice but to lose, I still have to believe."

"That you can win?"

"Yes."

There was no victory in any battle where defeat was assumed.

"I'll find a way to win, and I have to believe I can win."

"But what if you still lose in the end?"

"What does it matter?"

The Demon King had rejected Ludwig's mindset.

"'I'll do my best even if I'm going to lose' is just an excuse prepared for defeat. It's like saying, 'I still tried my best. I'll do better next time.' Isn't it just a way to create an escape route for yourself after you've been defeated?"

The resignation of having done one's best is ultimately just an excuse for oneself.

The same was true now.

The moment he thought his best was only up to this point, it was over.

He had already given up.

The Demon King had said.

Instead of making excuses for defeat, one should make resolutions for victory.

Because then, perhaps.

By some chance.

There might be a different outcome.

However, even in this impossible battle, the Demon King gained something through an impossible resolution.

As always, the Demon King, who had seized something in such battles, proved himself once again.

After all, who could confidently claim that they could not achieve such a victory?

Why was I giving up?

Claiming I had done my best.

Accepting this as my limit.

Why was I meekly accepting death?

Rather than continuing to lose and ending up as a good-for-nothing who could do nothing,

I desired a single victory.

I wanted to seize it just once.

I hadn't died yet.

Life was not over until my breath had completely stopped.

Although I had lost my right arm, which had given me indescribable strength,

I still had my body.

My legs trembled, and I lacked the strength to stand properly, my consciousness blurred,

But it seemed like there was still a drop of power somewhere.

If death was approaching,

I would not wait for it idly.

Even if I couldn't reach it, I tried.

—---

That was the driving force that allowed Ludwig to come this far, despite constantly failing and losing on all those days when he was exhausted and fell asleep.

Not giving up.

Stubbornly moving forward.

Ludwig finally realized that this was his only weapon and his most absolute weapon.

Thus, before the blade of death approached, he took a step towards it himself.

Oooh!

He drew upon the magical power that might have been left somewhere in his body and strengthened his physique.

Even with the arm of the Grandmaster that had been transplanted, he had been unable to bring down his opponent.

But if death approached, he should at least try to confront it.

He had always walked forward with the thought that it might not work, but one never knew.

With the determination to see his lifelong compulsion through to the end.

"Are you… trying to fight?"

A look of discomfort beyond annoyance appeared on the old monster's face.

It was astonishment.

With a faint blue magical aura around him, the boy who shouldn't have had the strength to move a single finger took a step forward.

It wasn't much, but there was still power left.

Even if it was a light that seemed to flicker out any moment,

It was definitely a light.

Even a weak light could dispel some darkness.

He poured that strength into his weakened body.

"Yeah. I have to fight."

If it was a fight in which he was bound to die,

If an insurmountable enemy was trying to kill him,

He was afraid.

It was despairing.

But if he was going to die either way,

Oooh!

"And if I fight,"

Why shouldn't his heart's compass point towards victory?

"I should… hope for victory."

Even if the desire for victory didn't bring victory,

"Because…"

Why should he submit, broken, and wait for death?

So, he wished.

"I will."

A declaration for victory.

"Defeat you."

Here.

"Bring it on."

Rumble!

A portion of the sky, which had been covered in dark clouds, opened up.

A single ray of golden light struck the ground.

Boom!

Something was thrust into the ground in front of Ludwig, accompanied by a fierce shockwave.

It definitely had the shape of a spear.

"Oh… that is…"

The old monster stared blankly at the spear that appeared in the sky with a flash of light and let out an exclamation.

It had always been the weapon of the weak.

The simplest form.

The most deadly form.

It had always been the weapon of the weak.

A simple shape and a sharp edge.

That most deadly straight line was precisely

The form a weapon should take for the weak when they faced insurmountable opposition.

The old monster knew the name of such a weapon.

The weapon of the weak.

The artifact of courage.

The Divine Spear.

"Alixion…”

It certainly had such a name.

CHAPTER 674

The Immortals had begun their indiscriminate slaughter, but the damage was minimal.

This was thanks to the efforts of Scarlett and Kono Lint, who had focused on neutralizing the Immortals as they moved through the battlefield.

However, the allied forces had all witnessed the Immortals attacking them.

None could properly see the battle taking place deep within the heart of Diane.

Even those who fought nearby only knew that a series of incredible events had occurred there.

Thus, the outcome and the process of the final battle remained unknown to all.

No one had seen the series of events that unfolded after the otherworldly dragon had disappeared.

Not even the monsters dared to approach the depths, so it was Olivia Lanze, wielding the power of death to dominate the skies, who had penetrated into the depths of Diane, annihilating the remaining monsters.

What Olivia saw was Reinhardt, unconscious and holding Ellen in his arms at the site of a fierce battle.

Olivia had carried the two of them on the dragon's back as they returned.

The Immortals were wiped out.

All of Diane's warp gates were destroyed.

And the remaining monsters either scattered or were defeated by the allied forces.

The rain had stopped.

The war was over.

Smoke rose from various parts of Diane, where the corpses of monsters were being burned.

The gate incident had been completely resolved, and although there would still be countless monsters remaining throughout the continent, no more would pour in from the other world.

Humanity had survived.

However, the atmosphere among the allied forces, which should have been more hopeful than ever, was gloomy.

Firstly, the sacrifices were greater than in any previous battle.

The Immortals, who had been able to wage war effortlessly until now, had suddenly attacked the allied forces in the final battle.

It seemed as if they were being made to pay the price for their easy advances.

Confusion, distrust towards the empire, and anger were rampant.

Then, the forces of the Demon King suddenly appeared, and the chaos that ensued was because they fought harder than anyone else.

Not everyone on the battlefield saw the Demon King fighting, but those who did witnessed him desperately killing monsters while luring the Immortals, who sought his death.

And it was vague, yet certain, that the Demon King was involved in the battle against the unknown final monster and the events that unfolded in the depths.

Distrust towards the empire.

And whether or not to trust the long-despised Demon King.

Amidst the complex situation, the allied forces were at a loss, establishing a base but

unable to find their bearings.

Nevertheless, the situation was somewhat better for the commanding officers.

From the beginning, they knew the Demon King was involved with the allied forces, and there were even those who decided to support him.

And now, even those who opposed the Demon King realized they had no choice but to support him.

Knowing that the empire had betrayed them at the most crucial moment, they were convinced that the empire was no longer on humanity's side.

The empire would rather kill them than join the Demon King's army.

The situation that unfolded during the battle in Diane could not be accepted by anyone.

Thus, the allied forces' command had already decided to support the Demon King wholeheartedly.

And so, the top brass of the Demon King's army had no choice but to enter the Allied Forces' general headquarters nonchalantly, and even though they received fearful glances from everyone, they took their seats close to the top.

However, the person occupying the highest seat in the Allied Forces' headquarters was a very unexpected figure.

"Has the damage report for each army been compiled?"

This person was no longer a citizen of the Empire, and this person’s appearance was similar to that of a demon.

But that person couldn't be considered not human.

Charlotte de Gardias was sitting in the highest position in the Allied Forces as the representative of the Demon King's army, in place of Emperor Bertus.

Something had changed.

But it was a strange shift in power, as it seemed that nothing had really changed.

In the vicinity of the heavily guarded general headquarters.

Due to the presence of beings that shouldn't be casually exposed to others' eyes, the security around the headquarters remained strict even as the extermination of the remaining monsters was underway.

But everyone would eventually find out.

That the entire leadership of the Allied Forces would be replaced by the Demon King's forces.

"Shouldn't you be attending the meeting, Sister?"

Looking at Olivia perched on a wooden crate near the headquarters, Harriet cocked her head.

"I hate dealing with headache-inducing discussions."

“…Won't all the tasks ahead be headache-inducing? What will you do if you already dislike them?"

"What can I do about it? Just let me be today."

"Hmm… I can't argue with that, but…”

In reality, Olivia was the one responsible for all issues regarding the organization moving forward.

There was much more for Olivia to do in the future than Rowan, the Holy Knight Commander, who was likely inside the headquarters, busily discussing matters.

With that in mind, Harriet couldn't help but find it unsightly that Olivia avoided the meeting, claiming she disliked thinking about such matters, and was outside sighing heavily.

Of course, Olivia had made significant contributions, leaving no room for criticism

even if she took a break.

She revived the legions of monsters and had them fight against the other monsters, and she flew across the battlefield on a dragon, saving countless people from death.

When the dragon adorned in a brilliant radiance passed by, those on the verge of death were resurrected.

It was such an overwhelming and miraculous sight that it left a deep impression on everyone, including Harriet.

The Holy Maiden riding a dragon.

That was already the talk among the Allied Forces.

Everyone was safe.

It was a miracle.

They all fought in the most dangerous places, but none of the Demon King's closest confidants were killed or injured.

Everyone played a crucial role, and each one had a decisive impact on the course of the battle.

In the battle of Diane, even the absence of just one person from the Demon King's forces would have caused casualties in the tens of thousands, so important were their roles.

Among them, Harriet, Liana, and Scarlett stood out for their significant impact.

Without Scarlett, the Allied Forces might have been annihilated while dealing with the rampaging Immortals.

Olivia looked at Harriet with exhausted eyes.

"Has Reinhardt not woken up yet?"

"It seems so."

“…What on earth happened?"

"I don't know."

But even those who had played such crucial roles didn't know the true nature of the ongoing anomalies at the heart of Diane.

The overwhelming monster.

The sudden evaporation.

By the time Olivia had arrived, everything had already ended.

She knew that Ellen and Reinhardt were safe and brought them back, but she still didn't know what had happened.

"What about that person?"

In response to Olivia's question, Harriet shook her head.

"She doesn't seem to remember anything."

Obviously, she was talking about Ellen.

"Did something go well? Where did the thing that was cast on her go? If it's gone, that's fortunate, but was there a way?"

Ellen couldn't remember anything, and Reinhardt was unconscious.

It was a peculiar conclusion, seemingly resolved yet leaving an uncomfortable aftertaste.

"Still… I'm glad everyone's safe."

At Olivia's sincere grumbling, Harriet's eyes widened in surprise.

"Yes, it's a relief."

"…”

Embarrassed, Olivia pursed her lips with her face flushed, while Harriet looked at her and smiled.

In a makeshift barracks near the headquarters,

Ellen sat quietly on a chair in front of a cot, looking down at the unconscious Reinhardt.

There was no way to tell when he would regain consciousness.

"Ellen?"

“…Yeah."

Harriet entered the barracks and checked Ellen's complexion.

Ellen knew what Harriet was worried about.

When Ellen had just come to her senses, she had cried so much she could hardly breathe, and it took a while for Harriet to comfort her.

"It's okay. It's gone. I can feel it."

"I'm glad…”

Harriet smiled with relief and embraced Ellen's neck.

They never thought a moment like this would come again.

Yet, miraculously, such a moment had arrived.

A moment when they could embrace each other without any worries.

That moment had come again.

Touched by the overwhelming moment, Harriet began to sob, and Ellen comforted her for a long time.

Ellen didn't know what had happened.

It was crucial to know how the final battle had gone, but Reinhardt was unconscious, and Ellen couldn't remember anything.

Olivia had just brought the two of them back after finding them lying on the battlefield.

And she had heard everything about how the battle in Diane had gone.

The departure and return of the Immortals, the rampage.

Even the annihilation.

It wasn't difficult to imagine what would happen next.

The empire had disappeared, and everyone would be wronged.

The demon king would rule over humanity.

"Let's stay together from now on. Everything is over… The sad times are over… Just like before. Okay?"

“…Yeah."

Ellen nodded slowly, tightly holding Harriet's arm as she embraced her.

She couldn't erase what had already happened.

She couldn't say there wouldn't be hard times ahead.

However, there were things she could regain and return to.

Ellen looked down at the peacefully sleeping Reinhardt.

She couldn't know what he had done, but Reinhardt must have saved her in some way.

Although she couldn't remember, she could clearly recall hearing a desperate voice from beyond her faint consciousness.

She knew he must have fought a difficult and desperate battle.

That's why he was sleeping so deeply now.

Swish

Ellen summoned the Cloak of the Sun.

She didn't know that the relics had left her hands for a while.

The flames of hatred that had once flickered in the Cloak of the Sun were now gone.

It was natural for the flames, which had burned on the fuel of hatred because something overflowing with hatred had taken root in her, to be gone now.

Hate had vanished, and so the flames of hatred no longer flickered upon the cloak of the sun.

This time, Ellen summoned the Moon Sword Lament.

However, the dark night sky was still reflected on the Moon Sword.

Hate had vanished.

But sorrow had not.

Thus, the Moon Sword, which responded to sorrow, still projected emptiness.

-Swish-

After returning the sword and the cloak, Ellen gently touched the forehead of the sleeping Reinhardt.

Hate had vanished, but sorrow had not.

This was because she knew they could not be together, whether she returned or not.

With tearful eyes, Ellen gazed at Reinhardt, who had ultimately saved her but whom she would never see again.

She stroked the forehead and hair of the one she loved.

Endlessly, Ellen continued to caress, as if it were the last time.

“I love you.”

Forever.

Though she wanted to whisper those words in his ear eternally.

A hero and a demon king could not coexist.

The existence of one always repelled the other.

In a world where the hero triumphed, there should be no demon king.

In a world where the demon king triumphed, there should be no hero.

“Really…… I love you so much.”

Thank you.

I love you.

Ellen whispered those words several times.

“I’m sorry……”

Finally, she burst into tears.

“I’m so…… so sorry……”

Her heart wrenched with the agony of not being able to be together, she wept endlessly.

Nighttime.

When Ellen cautiously emerged from the tent, Olivia Lanze, leaning against a

wooden crate, quietly watched her.

They were not on good terms.

They had made each other uncomfortable, and had even come close to a fistfight.

But Olivia Lanze had brought back not only Reinhardt, whom she had found on the battlefield, but also Ellen.

“Thank you, for taking me here…”

“Where are you going?”

However, Olivia asked a question before even receiving Ellen’s gratitude.

Olivia noticed the dried tear stains on Ellen’s cheeks.

Olivia knew what Ellen was trying to do.

“…”

Unable to utter a word, Ellen just lowered her eyes. Olivia continued to watch her silently.

“I don’t know what you’re thinking, but stay put. It’s all over now.”

Ellen lifted her head with difficulty.

“Since it’s all over…… I shouldn’t be here……”

Just because it was over didn’t mean everything had truly ended.

Something else would now begin.

She had to travel a long, uncertain road.

In the new history written in the name of the demon king, a hero should not exist.

Just by existing, countless discord would be created.

Those who rejected the oppression of the demon king would pin numerous hopes on the name of the hero. That could only lead to division.

Didn’t the enormous force called the Hero Religion already exist?

No one could say that the process of the demon king engulfing the world would be smooth.

There would be tremendous bloodshed.

And the existence of the hero would only absolutely increase the amount of blood that would flow.

However, she couldn't discard the life that was ultimately saved. She had to hide and live somewhere in the world.

The idea that the hero and the demon king would join forces to create a new world was laughable and unbelievable.

Those who supported the hero and the demon king would be divided and at odds.

In vain, hope would be created, only to tear the world apart and bring about countless deaths as a result.

Thus, in a world where the hero had triumphed, there would be no Demon King.

In a world where the Demon King had triumphed, there should be no hero.

That was why, like the empire that had destroyed itself, the hero had to disappear.

Olivia also understood what Ellen was saying.

It wasn't that it was better for her to be gone.

She had to be gone.

It certainly wasn't wrong to say that.

"I don't deserve to be here."

Ellen had betrayed Reinhardt.

In the end, that truth remained unchanging.

"I shouldn't be here. Just being here is a problem. And I don't deserve to be here."

Being saved was already more than enough.

To receive anything more from Reinhardt would be an insult to those who had believed in him from the start.

She couldn't afford to be greedy.

"I'm not ignorant of that."

"…"

"Do you think I want you to stay with us?"

"…"

"Do you think I'm saying this because I like you?"

From Olivia's point of view, Ellen had always been a thorn in her side.

If she were to disappear, Olivia would gladly welcome it with open arms.

But Olivia didn't want to let Ellen go.

Not even for Reinhardt, who had been waiting for this moment – she couldn't let her go like this.

"If it weren't for you, Reinhardt would be dead."

"You saved Reinhardt, and it's because of you that he's alive. That's enough. Don't worry about anything else. Is that so difficult?"

"Stop acting like an idiot and say something!"

-Thwack!

"…"

Olivia roughly grabbed Ellen's collar.

She returned the gesture Ellen had once given her.

Tears welled up in Olivia's eyes.

"Just stay put. Is that so difficult? Just be with us. It won't be easy, but we've managed so far, and we'll find a way!"

"I want that too… I want to be with you all…"

Tears filled Ellen's eyes at Olivia's outburst.

"I want to be with you… like before… to live that way…"

Of course, with the others as well.

And with Olivia Lanze.

Though they would bicker and get on each other's nerves, she wanted to return to those moments.

As Ellen sobbed and trembled, Olivia clenched her teeth and stared at her.

"But I can't… So many people have died because of me… Because of my selfishness… I can't let people die just because I want to be with Reinhardt… Just because I want to be with all of you…"

There were those whose very existence justified their actions.

Since the Gate Incident, Ellen had lived under such scrutiny.

Having received expectations that differed from her own resolve, things would remain the same even after the war.

Simply by being alive, Ellen would ignite the sparks of war, and they would grow into a massive wildfire.

That was why she couldn't stay here, even if her heart ached to do so.

As heartbreakingly joyous as the situation was, once the Demon King set his plan to engulf the world in motion, Ellen couldn't occupy the place beside him – it was a predetermined course.

If the Demon King led a simple rural life, there would be no problem, but as he had grand plans, Ellen couldn't be by his side.

Ellen was the biggest obstacle in the world the Demon King sought to create. In truth, death would have been preferable.

Olivia could no longer insist.

She knew. She understood that it would be best for Ellen to leave due to the problems that would arise simply from her existence.

Olivia wanted Ellen gone, too.

But, wasn't it heartbreaking?

In the end, they had succeeded in what had seemed impossible.

Ellen had finally returned to her original state.

After waking up, the first thing Reinhardt would face was the fact that Ellen had left.

That couldn't be allowed.

That's why Olivia wanted Ellen to leave, yet she couldn't let her go.

"Then, at least wait until he wakes up."

That's why Olivia had no choice but to say those words in the end.

However, as if even that was not possible, Ellen shook her head while sobbing.

"No… I can't do that. If I do, I won't be able to leave…"

The moment she exchanged even a single word with the awakened Reinhardt, she

would collapse.

If she were to just slightly embrace him, she would crumble with the desire to stay in his arms forever.

Even now, she could hardly take a step away. If she exchanged even a few words with the awakened Reinhardt, she felt she would never be able to get up from that spot.

So, it was right for her to leave.

If not now, she would never be able to leave.

That's why Ellen wanted to leave while Reinhardt was still asleep.

"You really are a stupid, foolish girl…!"

Just as Olivia was about to slap Ellen's cheek in frustration,

"Let her go."

Her hand stopped at the sound of the voice from behind.

"What…?"

There stood Charlotte, the former royalty with jet-black hair, and the second Archdemon, who seemed to blend into the darkness.

"Ellen is right."

Charlotte slowly approached and carefully released Ellen's collar from Olivia's grip.

"It's not the end; it's just the beginning. If we button the first button wrong, everything will collapse before it even starts."

"…"

"So, you have to let her go."

The Demon King had only swallowed the Allied Forces.

The work of returning to human lands and uniting all powers under the name of the Demon King had just begun.

Even if the hero had surrendered to the Demon King, people would still project their hopes onto the hero simply by knowing that the hero existed.

The hero, being too significant a symbol, could not be with the Demon King while alive.

Either die or live the life of a fugitive.

Those were the only two options.

So, if Ellen wasn't going to die, she had to disappear.

Charlotte looked at Ellen.

Both had not trusted Reinhardt.

However, Charlotte, who had transformed into the appearance of a demon, could be with the Demon King for that very reason.

Charlotte had become a completely different existence in too many aspects to be the basis of legitimacy by her mere existence.

"As there's no eternal struggle."

Charlotte quietly embraced the sobbing Ellen.

"There won't be an eternal farewell either…"

"…"

"Let's believe in that, for sure."

Believing that it was only a promise for the future, not an eternal separation.

Charlotte tightly embraced Ellen.

CHAPTER 675

Ellen had left.

Olivia gritted her teeth as she watched her retreating figure.

Although she didn't like Ellen, she still thought it wasn't right to send her away like this.

The mere thought of imagining Reinhardt's expression when he woke up was agonizing.

Olivia couldn't understand why she had been asked to let Ellen go.

She thought that if it were anyone else, Charlotte would have wished for Ellen to stay.

But beyond just telling her to leave, Charlotte's attitude felt cruel.

Charlotte had been responsible for Edina's internal affairs.

So when the era of the Demon King began, it would be Charlotte who would actually rule the world.

In the end, Charlotte would become the de facto emperor.

With an immeasurable number of big plans to devise, she couldn't afford to be caught up in petty feelings.

So, was it because it would be better without Ellen that she could tell her to leave so easily?

With such thoughts in mind, when Olivia looked back at Charlotte, she couldn't help but hold her breath.

"..."

With her eyes tightly shut, and her lips sealed, Charlotte was crying more

sorrowfully than anyone else.

How could her heart be at ease?

Charlotte, who had betrayed together with Ellen, felt the greatest guilt for saying that Ellen shouldn't be here.

So, watching Ellen's retreating figure, Charlotte cried silently, unable to even make a proper sound.

She knew very well that they were in the same situation.

And because she made Ellen leave with her own words, she couldn't bear it.

Although everything seemed to be resolved well, not everything could end well.

That's why Olivia did something she would never normally do.

“Crying your eyes out on a good day like this.”

“Ugh… Ugh…!”

Olivia hugged the silently crying Charlotte, and gently comforted her.

Ellen, with her hood pulled down, walked through the chaotic allied camp.

There were those tending to the fallen warriors, those checking on the damage, those crying, and those sitting somewhere, staring blankly.

The extent of the damage was the greatest among all the battles thus far.

The fight was over, but there was no one filled with joy.

More people were filled with fear of the new world that would come now that a certain fear had ended.

No one knew what would happen from now on.

The Demon King, who was defined as absolute evil, and the Hero who was designated as the one to defeat him.

The Demon King saved humanity, and the Hero fled from the allied camp as if running away.

People would never know who was truly in the wrong.

Those who encountered the manipulated truth would only learn another manipulated truth.

As one chaos ended, another began.

The fight against monsters wasn't completely over either.

But now that all the warp gates had been destroyed, civilization could be rebuilt.

As time passed and passed.

Someday, civilization would return to the era when it spread across the entire continent.

And although it couldn't be certain, if the Demon King did his job well, there would be no fighting between demons and humans in that world.

A world where demons and humans coexisted.

Could such a world be created in its entirety?

Could the hatred between them be overcome?

No one knew.

However, as Ellen was the last remnant of the ancient era, she could not join the new world.

She had to live somewhere quiet.

As if she existed, yet did not.

There were still two relics.

Monsters remained.

So Ellen still had much to do.

The people must not know that the hero was still alive.

From a lowly position, on the edge of the world.

She would live, killing the remaining monsters.

If she could take responsibility for her actions in such a way, she had to do it.

Charlotte said they would meet again someday, but Ellen didn't think it would be possible.

She couldn't even hope for it.

After such a long time, wouldn't it be too shameless to return and ask if her place was still available?

As time passed, her name would remain a memory of the past for Reinhardt.

Therefore, it was enough to watch from afar.

Hoping that the new world would be a good one.

It was enough to do what could be done for the people from a lowly position.

And so, as the chaotic allied forces' base was left behind, a dense cloud of smoke arrived at the outskirts.

Where should she go?

In the vast, desolate field, she was about to walk aimlessly, following the stars, when—

"Ellen…! Ellen!"

Unable to ignore the tearful voice from behind, Ellen clenched her teeth and looked back.

"Where… Where are you going! Where are you going…! Where are you going!"

Harriet de Saint Owan, with a distraught expression, was running desperately toward her, crying.

Barely able to run, stumbling on the rocky ground, she approached, wailing.

Although she had become a great mage, her physical strength was still poor. Gasping for breath as she arrived in front of Ellen, Harriet clutched Ellen's sleeve.

"Don't go… Where are you going… You said we'd stay together. Together… You said we'd be together…"

It's all over now.

We can be together now.

Her face reddened as she sobbed, gasping for breath.

"Don't go… Please. Don't go… It's all over now. Sad things, they're all over. You don't have to go, right? Huh? Why, why are you doing this… What about Reinhardt? What will Reinhardt do… Huh?"

She didn't want to see this.

It was painful enough for others to hold her back.

But seeing Harriet was especially painful.

She told Ellen everything would be fine now, and only good things would happen in the future.

Seeing Harriet cry her heart out after hugging her when she woke up, and then smile brightly while saying those words, Ellen felt pain.

That's why she had tried to disappear while Harriet was briefly away.

Why were they doing this?

People who should be happier without her were holding her back from leaving.

Even those who should wish for her absence more than anyone.

With Reinhardt unconscious, those who should hope for her departure were holding her back.

As Harriet clung to her, crying as if determined to never let her go, Ellen looked down at her silently.

Harriet had been her friend, second only to Reinhardt since their time at the temple.

But they couldn't fully like each other.

From the beginning, they knew their hearts were heading in the same direction and became friends despite that.

As such, they couldn't help but resent each other to some extent, as much as they liked and cared for one another.

And that resentment had always manifested itself, to some degree, as Harriet's jealousy towards Ellen.

But now, Harriet was pleading with Ellen not to leave.

Asking what Reinhardt would do.

Talking about such things.

"Don't go. Okay? I don't know why you're doing this, but… if you don't have to go, then you shouldn't. Let's stay together, alright?"

It was probably because Harriet de Saint Owan valued herself as much as she loved Reinhardt.

Come to think of it.

It had always been that way.

At some point, Harriet had always been that kind of person.

Always yielding, always wanting to be together, but always giving up so much to Ellen.

When her jealousy and sadness had reached their peak, she would merely say,

"How pathetic."

That was the harshest thing a friend could say to another.

"Actually, I might not… have to go."

In truth, there might not have been a real reason for her to disappear.

She could have just stayed by his side somehow, for whatever reason.

Whether people said the Hero had surrendered to the Demon King, or that she had betrayed him.

Leaving people to their own imaginations, pretending not to know what was happening, and simply enjoying happy days together.

But she had been selfish enough up until now.

She had betrayed Reinhardt and received far too much in return.

In the end, she had crossed an uncrossable river and somehow been saved.

Having received so much, she couldn't be any more selfish.

Blind to the problems that would arise because of her.

Longing for love, longing to be loved.

Wishing for more than that would be a cruel thing.

She couldn't allow herself such a thing.

She couldn't accept such happiness.

Such safety.

She couldn't convince herself that such a life was coming her way.

The compulsion to live in despair.

The compulsion to live for atonement in the midst of guilt.

Casting aside all other reasons.

The dark compulsion to leave, just for that reason, was recognized.

"So don't go… if you don't have to, it's right not to go…"

Looking down at Harriet, who was pleading through her tears, Ellen didn't cry.

Instead, she smiled.

"Reinhardt is right."

"Huh…?"

At the sudden words, teary-eyed Harriet looked up at Ellen.

The words Reinhardt always used to call Harriet.

Wishing only for everything to go well, not wanting anything good just for herself.

Not knowing how to act selfishly.

Pleading for Ellen to stay for Reinhardt's sake, even though his biggest problem was willing to disappear on its own.

"You're a blockhead."

"Huh…?"

What else should one call such a person, if not a fool?

Harriet may have been the smartest person Ellen knew.

But in the end, she was the biggest fool.

Harriet stopped crying and stared blankly at Ellen, confused by her sudden words.

"I've already received so much, haven't I? An overwhelming amount, too much."

There was also a sense of anxiety that if she were any greedier, she would be punished severely.

"…"

"If you continue to act so kindly, you won't be able to have anything."

Being kind alone won't let you have anything.

After yielding, yielding, and yielding again, in the end, your place will disappear.

In order to have it, one must take it.

If you dream of a too perfect situation, by the time you come to your senses, you might find that everything else has been taken away.

"Don't let Reinhardt take you for granted."

"…"

He may cherish you, but if you let him take your presence for granted, he won't feel desperate.

Then you will always be pushed to second place, or even third.

Without Ellen, Reinhardt was desperate for her.

Because Ellen's life was in danger, Reinhardt thought only of her.

Ellen didn't know Reinhardt's heart either.

The heart is neither absolute nor eternal.

After so much time had passed, everyone's feelings had changed, and the same was

true for Reinhardt.

They might not even realize it themselves.

Upon reflection, Ellen had never yielded before.

She hadn't even thought about it.

She didn't know if what she was doing was yielding or if she had the right to say such a thing.

However, having received so much, it was time to step aside for those who deserved it more.

Any more greed would only bring about more pain.

That's why, even if only a little, such a kind person must come to their senses.

Looking at her friend, who didn't even know what she was hearing, Ellen smiled sadly.

As her precious friend said, she was pitiful.

It had always been that way.

"I'll go."

In the end, she would disappear pitifully and selfishly.

It was an unfamiliar ceiling.

"…"

The moment he thought that, his body sprang out of bed.

Somewhere, there was a pungent smell.

He could instinctively tell that it was the smell of a battlefield.

A simple bed.

And a barracks.

It meant he was in a tent.

What had happened?

"Uh… huh!"

Then, as he turned to the sound from beside her, there was someone who had been startled awake by his sudden movement.

Harriet.

"You're awake…!"

-Wow!

He was relieved to see Harriet was unharmed.

"What… What happened?"

He had passed out at the last moment.

After giving the final order to Antirianus, he didn't know what would happen next.

Being alive meant that Antirianus either hadn't killed her or had failed to do so.

Harriet gently patted Reinhardt's trembling back, filled with anxiety.

"Don't worry… It's all over."

In Harriet's voice, he could sense many things.

A sadness mixed with relief.

That told him that many people were safe.

However, the sadness in her voice.

He couldn't help but sense what it meant.

He had been unconscious for three days.

Soon, three days had passed since the end of the Diane battle.

He heard about what had happened afterward from Harriet.

Charlotte was reorganizing the allied forces and quelling the chaos in his stead.

It must have been an exhausting situation, dealing with the chaos and division of each army.

At the end of various stories, he heard the words that Harriet uttered through her tears.

Ellen had left.

"I'm sorry… I couldn't hold her back… I wanted to stop her somehow… somehow…"

As Harriet sobbed, struggling to speak about something that had happened three days ago, Reinhardt carefully embraced her.

Ellen had left.

Her heart felt heavy.

But she was safe, wasn't she?

In any case, she had returned to her original state and left on her own accord.

There were several reasons why it was shocking but not utterly devastating.

Perhaps it was because he had somewhat known that Ellen would do such a thing.

He only thought about getting Ellen back.

Just thinking about how to do it was overwhelming.

After getting Ellen back, he hadn't considered at all how to proceed with Ellen in his arms.

He didn't know how to handle it and couldn't even fathom it.

As Ellen had said, her existence in the world they would create was a seed of great discord.

So.

Rather than being relieved, he was almost frightened.

He had an inkling that he could only become a different being in the path he had to take now.

Things he once cherished became worthless in the face of reality.

There would be moments when he would have to let go, and even destroy things with his own hands, and now he would have to accept them as a matter of course.

Ellen had returned.

She was alive.

Wasn't that enough?

Their relationship had been one of luxury for both of them.

They had no future other than one of them dying, or both of them dying.

It had been impossible for them to face the future while both were alive, so shouldn't they be grateful for this situation where it was somewhat possible?

Wishing for more than that was too much, wasn't it?

With such thoughts, he couldn't help but let out a bitter laugh.

She probably left with those thoughts too.

Thinking that anything more would be a luxury.

Just like he did.

She must have felt the same way.

"Don't cry. It's okay."

"Sniff… Sob! Ugh…!"

That's why he quietly patted the sobbing Harriet's back while holding her in his arms.

CHAPTER 676

He had won.

He had gained much and would continue to gain more.

Yet, even in victory, there were things he had to lose.

It was inevitable.

There was still much he did not know.

What had become of Antirianus after he absorbed the vengeful spirits?

How he had managed to survive remained a mystery.

Ellen had left.

She must have had her reasons for leaving him.

He could no longer dwell on such things.

The end of everything led to a new beginning.

Now, there would be even more tasks to undertake.

He had to truly begin the journey of becoming the ruler of the entire world.

If he crumbled over the disappearance of a single person, he would not be worthy of ruling the world.

He got up from the bed and straightened his clothes.

He was not a superhuman.

But he had to walk the path of a superhuman.

At the very least, he had to imitate what he could. Harriet looked at him as if he were a completely different person.

He was neither shocked nor saddened by Ellen's departure.

There was no time for self-pity.

What had been recovered was recovered.

What had been lost was lost.

He did not cling to it.

"Harriet."

"Yes?"

"Let's go see Charlotte."

From now on, he had to become an entirely different person.

His existence had to be so thoroughly different that even he would eventually forget himself.

He would become the ruler of the continent.

Charlotte had been overseeing everything happening in the vicinity of Diane, from consolidating the damage reports at the alliance's command center to treating the injured soldiers.

As a result, the highest-ranking officers of each army were coming and going around the headquarters.

It was strange to think that he now sat at the head of the table in a place where previously he could only enter through subterfuge.

He called Charlotte aside and listened to her report on the current situation of the alliance.

"The scale of the damage is quite significant. And the confusion is still severe. Most of the soldiers don't even know that we've taken control of the alliance's top brass. If they find out, the chaos will only increase. That's why we're enforcing a gag order on the top brass of each army."

The top brass was uncertain whether their actions were right or wrong, and they were unsure about the fate of the empire. They couldn't properly direct their hatred.

It would be absurd to tell them that the alliance had been swallowed up by the Demon King.

Although noise and confusion were inevitable, there was no need to deliberately amplify them.

"We need to decide whether to make a big fuss or keep it quiet."

"In broad strokes, yes."

Would they publicly announce the Demon King's rule or conceal it ambiguously?

Concealing it would bring the fear of repercussions, while revealing it would invite immediate chaos.

"More importantly, we need to think about the return of the alliance's forces. The alliance's troops were gathered from various places and marched from the Imperial Capital. Considering the time and food needed to return safely to the Imperial Capital, this is also an issue. And once they return to the Imperial Capital, it's not the end. Sending those troops back to their respective regions will consume a tremendous amount of time and resources."

True.

A vast amount of resources had been invested to bring humanity's combined forces this far.

The war may have ended, but in reality, it wouldn't be truly over until these troops safely returned home.

They all had to be sent home.

How would they move and how would they be disbanded?

Returning the allied forces to the first return point, the Imperial Capital, would take nearly a year. During that time, we would have to feed the army.

Just thinking about one of these issues was enough to make my head ache, and I was already running out of breath.

"Um…"

As Charlotte and I discussed these daunting problems, Harriet cautiously interjected.

"I think… I might be able to help with that."

"…Huh?"

I remembered that Harriet had invented a new warp gate system.

"But didn't you say that you needed a nexus or something like that?"

We would need to create a warp gate. We couldn't make one that would take us directly from here to the Imperial Capital.

But considering the time it would take to restore all the destroyed gate facilities so far, wouldn't that also take an enormous amount of time in the end?

"No, I can send the entire allied forces not only to the Imperial Capital but anywhere in the world in an instant."

This kid, again.

What kind of trouble had she gotten herself into?

During the battle at Diane, I hadn't known what was happening in various places.

I had used all my strength to escape from the Immortals.

So, I had only heard about the strange magical sphere that had appeared in the rear

of the battlefield.

It was magic that manifested by drawing mana from nature.

For example, it was magic that drew mana from the atmosphere to activate.

I couldn't understand the specific principles even if I heard them.

However, I knew that Harriet had managed to make my old nonsense a reality.

The important thing was that through this magic, a massive spatial teleportation capable of returning the entire allied forces from this place directly to the Imperial Capital was possible.

With a nervous expression, Harriet fidgeted with her fingers and continued.

"I don't know what to call it… but I've become able to use such magic."

"You really…"

"Ah…"

As if anticipating what was about to happen, Harriet's face turned pale, and she slowly backed away.

"You're my top genius!"

-Wham!

"I knew you'd do something like this!"

I hugged Harriet tightly, and as always, she grimaced.

This magical genius had reduced astronomical military expenses with just one spell.

Charlotte watched me hugging Harriet, who didn't know what to do, with a warm expression.

"Really… what a relief. Just sending this army back was suffocating. So, what do we do now?"

The greatest, most sublime, noble, beautiful, and even cute genius of the universe had blown away all our problems at once.

The rough way? The secretive way?

Neither was needed.

"The allied forces will withdraw. We'll tear it all apart."

All the troops would return to their homelands in an instant.

In the end, whether one became king of the world or sat at the top, what soldiers wanted was to return alive.

Wouldn't they be unable to hate us unconditionally for opening the path to their survival?

The allied forces withdrew.

And as I was preoccupied with resolving the postwar situation, I walked through the busy allied forces camp, heading somewhere.

There were things I needed to see with my own eyes.

My destination was the Temple Royal-class garrison.

The moment I entered, I couldn't help but feel the atmosphere change drastically as people recognized me.

The Royal Class members must have already known that I had seized control of the allied forces' command.

However, encountering me in person was quite a different matter.

Amid the frozen atmosphere, I faced the fearful gazes directed at me.

Yet, among them, there were bound to be those who looked at me without fear.

"You're here."

Kono Lint.

He approached me and extended his hand.

Just as he approached me without hesitation, I firmly grasped his hand.

"Yeah."

If it hadn't been for him and Scarlett, the allied forces might have been annihilated by now.

In a sense, Kono Lint and Scarlett had done even more critical work than I had.

There were casualties among the Royal Class members, but none of the people I knew had died.

Adriana, Scarlett, Erich, and Cliffman were all safe.

As were the rest of the people.

It was a miracle, but it was also inevitable.

Although the situation had changed considerably, our forces were much larger and stronger than in the original story.

Thus, the absolute number of casualties was extremely low compared to the original.

"What about the others?"

"Well… They're just… standing around, dumbfounded."

But Kono Lint's expression was not good.

"What about Cayer?"

“…He still hasn't woken up."

“…I see."

While everyone was safe, there was one exception.

I heard that Cayer Voiden had fallen into a coma.

As I opened the tent and entered, I saw a familiar face.

"Ah, um…"

"It's been a while."

Redina, who had grown up so much that I could no longer call her a little girl, saw me and jumped up from her seat.

She seemed to want to say something, but couldn't find the words, and her mouth just twitched.

Even if they didn't see me as an enemy, everyone probably felt the same fear of me.

Only a very few people, like Kono Lint, could approach me first.

"I just came to see how things are."

"…"

At my words, Redina lowered her head.

Cayer lay on a makeshift bed in front of the chair where Redina had been sitting.

It was a relief that everyone was safe, but someone had to be hurt.

Cayer was not a fighter himself.

Redina clenched her teeth and slowly explained.

The Immortal had taken over their role, and Redina had promised Cayer that she would use the Ark Crystal only sparingly in the final battle.

"But the Immortal disappeared… I had no choice but to use the Ark Crystal."

But the Immortal suddenly vanished.

So, Cayer, who had been on standby, had to charge the Ark Crystal immediately.

He fought by charging the Ark Crystal, which he had used to its limit, in real-time, and he charged it beyond his own limit.

As a result, even before the battle was over, Cayer had already fallen into a coma.

Harriet couldn't have used her magic everywhere on the battlefield.

With their immense power, and Redina's ability to wield it, many people were saved thanks to the pair.

But as a consequence, Cayer was in a coma, with no indication of when he might regain consciousness.

Redina began to sob.

"You must… You must promise."

"…”

"That you'll create a world where everyone is happy… Promise."

A world where everyone is happy.

What a naïve phrase.

It was a naive thing to say, knowing that even children understood it was impossible.

Redina, who was no longer a child, begged with tears.

There was no world where everyone was happy.

One couldn't promise such a thing.

In front of Redina, who cried with a disheveled face.

"I will… I will do it that way."

I couldn't bring myself to say otherwise.

"It's all over."

"Yes."

Adriana's expression seemed more overwhelmed than moved.

It was the moment they had been running towards, with the sole goal of ending the Gate incident.

It was an absolute goal, an absolute good.

That absolute good had been achieved.

Adriana and I, who had vowed to survive together, were able to meet again, intact.

Now there was no more absolute obligation to follow. From now on, it would be a time of choices and decisions. In this process, we might again summon irreversible events through wrong choices and wrong decisions.

There might have been people among us whom we would never see again.

Someone had actually died.

Adriana and I had survived.

"Now, are you going to become the Emperor of the Continent?"

Adriana looked at me with a strange smile.

The Emperor of the Continent.

Yes, I had to become that.

"Perhaps."

"Hmm…"

“…Why?"

At my response, Adriana looked at me with a lukewarm expression and slapped my shoulder.

-Slap!

"Why, why did you hit me?"

"If you use ambiguous words like 'perhaps' when you're trying to become such an important figure, will others, including myself, find it trustworthy? Can't you say it with more conviction?"

Adriana's expression, as she forced her eyes wide open, was quite fierce and also adorable.

So that's it.

Ambiguous words were no longer allowed.

No, on the contrary, it seemed like people in such positions often used ambiguous words.

Of course, there was no need to follow that.

"Then, I will definitely become it."

"That's right, it should be like that."

Finally, Adriana smiled as if she was satisfied.

As I walked around the Royal Class garrison, I encountered several familiar faces. Those who knew me only looked at me from a distance with fearful eyes.

It was only because of Cliffman that I could endure until I called Scarlett and Kono Lint.

Miraculously reaching the Master Class, I heard that he played a crucial role in

protecting Liana and Harriet.

The talent for combat.

Cliffman didn't seem particularly thrilled about it.

He just seemed grateful that he could protect Liana and Harriet.

"You've worked hard."

"So have you."

Despite the long time that had passed since we last met, the conversation between Cliffman and me was limited to that.

But it had always been like that with him.

There wasn't much conversation.

It always felt like this was enough.

The fact that it was still the same was quite fascinating.

In this way, I met people while walking around the garrison.

And then, I realized something.

"Reinhardt… have you seen Ludwig, by any chance?"

Ludwig was nowhere to be found.

"No… I haven't seen him."

"I see…"

Scarlett lowered her head with a desperate expression.

The rampage of the Immortals meant there was a very high possibility that Christina had died.

And Ludwig had been moving with Christina.

However, I saw Ludwig in the deepest part of the battlefield.

I was sure he was moving in a different direction from the Immortals.

Christina must have been dead.

I had no idea what had happened to Anna and Louis.

After the battle ended, Ludwig might have joined them.

But the possibility of his death was also high.

It seemed right to assume the possibility of death, as he had fought in the most dangerous place.

Could Ludwig have died so meaninglessly?

I couldn't have any certainty about that.

No matter how much time passed afterward, I never heard any stories of finding or sighting Ludwig.

CHAPTER 677

The allied forces were like a massive beast.

Their mere existence required a vast amount of supplies every day.

Thus, it was best to disband them as quickly as possible once their purpose was fulfilled. Fortunately, thanks to Harriet, we could disband the allied forces in the shortest amount of time.

This had several effects.

It dispersed the remaining human forces across the continent, making it impossible for them to unite.

Harriet's power was, in itself, the ability to transport legions, rendering an enemy attack on us impossible, while allowing us to attack the enemy forces.

After dividing humanity, we exerted influence on each of them.

We were too strong an enemy for them to resist, and even if they had the intention to rebel, realizing that would be an impossible feat.

This reinforced the effectiveness of our rule.

After gaining their loyalty, we disbanded the allied forces.

The fact that the soldiers could return to their homes without a lengthy march was satisfying in itself.

And the knowledge that it was possible thanks to the Demon King would have some positive effects.

Of course, we couldn't win everyone's hearts.

Divisions would arise, and the seeds of it were scattered everywhere.

But before we could disband the allied forces, there was something to be done.

At the headquarters of the supreme command.

Charlotte sat on my left, and Olivia Lanze was on my right.

The last of the empire and my left arm.

The symbol of the Holy Order and my right arm.

And in front of me were the representatives of all the remaining human factions.

"Welcome, everyone."

I said, looking at the frozen audience.

From the moment they sat in this place, they might have cast uncomfortable and fearful glances at me, but none of them could resist me.

They couldn't even rise from their seats.

"I am the Demon King, Vallier."

This scene already signified that I had become the ruler of the continent.

So far, Charlotte had acted in my place, so they knew that the rule of the Demon King had begun, but it seemed that they really realized that everything had fallen into the hands of the Demon King when they saw me in this form.

In this place, countless people who had already decided to join me were seated.

Louise von Schwarz of Kernstadt, who had led the event, was sitting close to the head seat, and naturally, Rowan, the commander of the Holy Knights, was present.

Of course, the Archduke of Saint Owan was also in this place.

It was amusing that his seat, which had been close to the last, was now closer to the head.

He had been pushed to the very last seat because his daughter sided with the Demon King. Naturally, it wouldn't have been his will to sit there.

But now that his daughter sided with the Demon King, he found himself sitting closer to the head. This, too, would have been irrelevant to the Archduke of Saint Owan's will.

From being a traitor to humanity, he was now becoming a meritous figure in the new empire.

The Archduke of Saint Owan's stern expression clearly revealed that he had no interest in his changed position.

How should I put it?

He seemed like a pillar, regardless of how I looked at him.

He appeared to be someone living in a place unrelated to the world's interests.

A doting father, that is.

A strange person, too.

In fact, when I had passed out, the Archduke of Saint Owan was the first to find Harriet and held her in his arms.

Anyway, a considerable number of representatives in this place had decided to join me even before the war ended.

Louise von Schwarz had taken on the role.

The imperial forces affiliated with the coalition were already in our grasp. Naturally, not only was the emperor absent from this gathering, but there were also a considerable number of imperial commanders present.

They had already turned their backs on the empire due to the massive betrayal that occurred during the Diane battle.

And Charlotte had completed the process of capturing all the imperial officers and commanders.

They were no longer part of the imperial forces.

"The Gardias Empire shall disappear, and I shall be the ruler of the continent from now on."

"I hope that this will not be taken as an oppressive and rigid relationship of absolute domination and loyalty."

"Indeed."

"Let's think of it as a 'promise'."

"I will help you when you need me."

"So, help me when I need you."

"There won't be much change."

"The important thing is that monsters still roam the continent."

"Rebuilding a broken civilization will require an incalculable amount of time and resources."

"Of course, the chasm of distrust and resentment built up between us is deep, and our races may even be different."

"So, whatever thoughts you may have inside, I cannot do anything about it."

"The first thing you need to do is not to show excessive loyalty to me or offer me something."

"Do your best for yourself in your own position."

"Rebuilding the civilization and restoring the collapsed livelihood."

"That should be the task you must perform before showing loyalty to me."

"You don't need to offer me anything."

"I don't intend to force anything from you."

"Just accept me."

"And above all else."

"Live well."

"That is the greatest loyalty you can show me."

They were not capable of giving anything to me.

Living well while scattered in every direction.

Rebuilding a broken civilization and rising again.

Reconstructing and revitalizing a ruined civilization was my goal. So, the loyalty they could show me was not a few tributes, but rather to establish a foundation on which they could stand on their own again.

Had they expected some terrifying words to come from the mouth of a being called the Demon King?

You are all finished now.

Pay back what you received.

Foolish humanity shall now pay the price of defeat.

Or perhaps, if you defy me, a tremendous blood vengeance will ensue.

Were they waiting for such words?

But when the words came to live well in their own positions, they all wore a bewildered expression.

"Do not think that this is an easy command."

"In this despairing era, I am giving you the most difficult command."

Is living well easy?

To the people who had to live in a broken world, it was, in fact, the most difficult command.

In this reality where monsters still roamed and most of the civilization had been destroyed, living well was undoubtedly the most brutal command.

As I added more, only then did they all start to think about how to live well, and their expressions darkened.

It seemed that they now understood that this was indeed the most difficult and harsh task.

They were all tired of discussing death and blood.

There was no need to warn those who did not serve me or those who betrayed me.

Such matters could be discussed later without being too late.

"I said I would help you."

It was a joyful day.

"The first thing I can give, I will give."

The war was over.

"First of all, everyone, go home."

Go home, clean your feet, and rest.

No exceptions for anyone.

No one was surprised by the news that the allied forces would prepare for withdrawal as soon as the cleanup of the battlefield was completed.

It was probably because they thought it was a procedure similar to the return to the capital and the occupation battle.

But when I explained that the withdrawal I mentioned was literally just that, everyone's expressions became puzzled.

When they heard that they could instantly return to their respective hometowns, their mouths gaped open.

In just one day, they could return to their hometowns.

Though there were those who had lost their hometowns, everyone had a place to return to.

And it wasn't only the soldiers who wanted to go back.

Everyone looked as if they had been struck by a bolt of money while they were asleep.

There was no need to fight the empire.

All they had to do was return as they were.

There, they could simply live.

Everyone was astonished that accepting my rule came with such a condition.

No, this wasn't a reward but a sweet fruit that could be received by accepting the Demon King's rule.

It was a price so sweet that it was worth doubting whether it was a poisoned chalice.

"Didn't I say? Go back and be faithful to your own tasks. But there will be no more supplies to feed you. Surviving on your own will not be easy."

It was definitely not an easy task.

Only then did everyone start to worry, realizing that being able to return wasn't necessarily all good.

"There is nothing more to say. Prepare for withdrawal as soon as you're ready, and report when your units are prepared. I'll send you back immediately."

Among those sitting, there were those with determined expressions.

They seemed to have prepared some incredible words and looked as if they were ready to face death at this place.

There certainly seemed to be those who wanted to say something about dirty tricks or the like.

However, due to the meaning contained in the words I had thrown, they couldn't bring themselves to open their mouths.

They were overwhelmed by the mere fact that they could return immediately, and seemed to have forgotten what they had wanted to say.

Their wide-eyed expressions were quite refreshing.

"Go back, and live well."

That was the first decree of the new emperor of the continent.

But among them, someone suddenly raised their hand.

"Excuse me… Demon King…"

I didn't know who it was.

"What is it?"

He had a flustered expression.

"If the allied forces withdraw… How do you plan to… occupy the empire…?"

Judging by their curiosity about whether it was possible to do so with only the remaining imperial and Demon armies, it seemed like they were supporting me.

Occupying the empire, huh?

"May I speak on that matter?"

Before I could say anything, Rowan opened her mouth.

"The emperor has already fled."

I had already heard this.

But the fact that the emperor had fled.

With that word, even the last loyalists of the empire, who might have still been in their seats, vanished.

The throne and the palace were empty.

All we had to do was enter the empty palace.

Inside the swaying carriage moving at a steady pace, Bertus gradually regained consciousness.

“…Ugh!"

In the dim carriage, Bertus hastily sat up.

Where was this place?

His entire body felt as heavy as waterlogged cotton.

He couldn't even tell how long he had been asleep.

He was simply lying in a dark carriage, moving somewhere.

Bertus tried to recall his last memory.

The battle of Diane had ended.

And so, Bertus prepared.

He prepared as the last emperor of the disappearing Gardias Empire.

He prepared to pay the price for betraying humanity and being the root cause of everything.

A sacrifice was needed for the new era.

Thus, the empire would vanish alongside the absolute evil of the emperor as the symbol of hatred.

With the true source of all evil, the emperor, hanging on a scaffold, all hatred would burn away and a new era would begin.

He had been accumulating all these actions for that purpose.

So, Bertus prepared.

He prepared to transfer everything to the new power.

And he prepared for the proper attitude that the one who needed to die should have.

However, Saviolin Turner returned.

The order Bertus had given her wasn't just to blow up the underground of the magic university.

She no longer needed to obey his commands.

She was no longer his knight.

She was told not to return and to survive.

He had said to leave the empire and to quit being a knight of a country that would disappear.

She was told to live according to her own will.

So, cutting off the vow of loyalty that bound her was also part of his command.

However, Saviolin Turner returned after the battle of Diane and a few days had passed.

"Lady Turner…?"

The knight who was told not to return had put the emperor to sleep.

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty."

That faint voice was the last thing he remembered.

In the dim carriage interior, Bertus felt his body.

His clothes had been changed.

In the dim light, his clothes were clearly not very luxurious.

Thump thump!

After knocking on the driver's seat of the carriage a few times, the carriage stopped with a slight jolt.

Soon, there was movement at the driver's seat.

Clunk!

As the door opened, there was, of course,

"Your Majesty."

"Lady Turner…"

Saviolin Turner's face.

"What… what are you doing?"

He had told her to live freely and to survive.

The emperor's knight had done the unthinkable act of kidnapping the emperor.

Saviolin Turner's expression was miserable because she knew what she had done.

"This… this can't be. This shouldn't be."

Turner had to know what Bertus was trying to do. She had to know what the emperor was doing and preparing, even if he didn't say it.

The emperor had dug his own grave.

All he had to do was enter it.

The moment was right in front of him, and he had already made up his mind.

Having prepared for the new era by embracing everyone's sins and dying as the symbol of evil,

In the final moment, Saviolin Turner's actions had thrown off all his calculations.

Bertus didn't know how far the carriage had come or where it was heading.

It was obvious what Saviolin Turner was trying to do because of the ordinary clothes and the unadorned carriage.

"We must go back."

It was time for that, and it was all a part of the conspiracies and schemes for that purpose.

"Why must it be like this?"

Tears finally filled her eyes.

"I must die. Someone has to take responsibility."

The death of the emperor wouldn't extinguish all the sparks of hatred, nor would it erase all the sins.

But at least some of it would disappear.

Everyone resented the emperor, and wouldn't the number of people resenting the new era decrease at least a little if the emperor, who was the symbol of that resentment, died?

"That is not courage, Your Majesty."

"…"

From a very young age.

The knight who had been with him since his infancy, who occasionally played with him when he was young, finally shed tears that he had never seen before in his life.

"That is ultimately, running away."

It was passing the world onto someone else and escaping into death.

If I have paid my own price.

To die satisfied, it was not about taking responsibility but avoiding it.

"Do you have the courage to die but not the courage to live a disgraceful life by running away? Why… why must it be like this?"

Death does not complete everything.

Death does not solve everything.

Why insist on dying?

Wasn't it courageous to endure the life of a disgusting and dirty fugitive?

In the end, wasn't his desire for death just a way to find his own honor?

If he sought solace in dying with a false accusation on him.

What reason was there not to live a truly despicable and dirty life as a fugitive?

Wasn't it better to survive, even if it meant wearing the real disgrace rather than seeking fake honor?

"Lady Turner… I… I don't want that. I…"

Thud

Saviolin Turner finally knelt down and lowered her head.

She had always been a loyal knight, but this was the first time he had seen her throw

herself so completely and kneel like this.

No matter how much of a subject she was, she had dignity.

Even the emperor could not dare to demand such a level of submission from her, with her head pressed to the ground.

And yet, there she was, sobbing with her head pressed to the ground.

"Please… Please…”

"I have lived a life of following orders."

"Although loyalty does not require a reward."

"I, Saviolin Turner, the Emperor's Sword."

"A servant of the empire, I have dedicated my entire life to the empire."

"Your Majesty."

"Please live."

"Even if it's a disgraceful life, even if it's a coward's life."

"I beg you to live."

"That is the only reward… I desire."

"Didn't you tell me to live according to my own will now?"

"This is my will."

With wide eyes, he looked at his knight, who was not kneeling but lying down, crying.

She had devoted her life to the sword and her life to the empire.

She had lived her entire life solely for the empire.

She had been a knight of the empire even before he was born.

No, she had been a knight of the empire even before his parents were born.

She had never asked anything of the empire.

She was the oldest loyalist of the empire, the person who had served the longest, and served the royal family from the closest position.

She had done dirty jobs, and any necessary tasks.

She had lived like that without any complaints.

Although it was a knight's virtue not to expect a reward for loyalty.

If it was her.

If it was someone who had served as long as she had.

She would undoubtedly have the right to demand a reward.

She was even afraid to use the word "reward," so she called it a repayment.

The only thing she wanted in return for her long-standing loyalty was just one thing.

To live.

"Please… Your Majesty… Please…"

A cowardly life.

Would it be better for the last emperor, who had betrayed humanity, to hang from a gallows? Or would it be better for him to run away and survive somewhere?

Focusing hatred on the dead Demon King was impossible.

When Bertus learned that there was a surviving successor in the demon world, he was delighted.

He had said that without even realizing he was speaking to the Demon King's

successor.

The existence of the Demon King was actually necessary for the unification and maintenance of the empire.

The last Demon King was alive somewhere.

Just by that fact alone, people trembled in fear and focused all their hopes on the empire.

All of humanity's power was concentrated in the empire.

They had used the Demon King as a symbol of hatred.

Was it now time for the emperor to perform that role?

The life of a fugitive, a life of a despicable and disgraceful loser.

The reality that the emperor had run away rather than the reality that the emperor had died.

Would that be better for a new era?

Bertus could not know.

However.

His knight was wailing.

A person who had lived their entire life for the empire.

Now, having lost the empire, she was begging him to live, throwing her whole body into protecting the last remnant of the empire, the emperor.

With gritted teeth, Bertus looked at Saviolin Turner, who was desperately pleading.

He stood there, blankly, unable to hold onto or push away the last knight of the Gardias royal family.

CHAPTER 678

The words that needed to be said to the Allied Force Commanders were not long.

Withdraw all the allied forces and send them back to focus on reconstruction.

Effective control was not immediately possible, nor was it meaningful.

It would come after they became self-sufficient in their own lands.

For now, it was better to disband the allied forces, scatter them, and ensure they couldn't regroup or disperse without our strength.

My decision to rule over you does not bring actual control.

The more problems we solved, the more they seemed to increase, rather than decrease.

After ordering the withdrawal preparations for the allied forces, I entrusted all these matters to Rowan, Louise, and Harriet.

The rest of us had to deal with more pressing issues.

The vacant Imperial Palace.

We needed to fill the emptiness of the Imperial Throne as soon as possible.

Since there were no battles scheduled anyway, only Charlotte, Olivia, and I arrived at the palace.

The palace guards seemed to know that we were coming, and they naturally cleared the way as I appeared.

I could not see the expressions of the guards inside their helmets.

However, all preparations for a bloodless takeover of the palace had been made.

Of course, it must have been done by Bertus.

The palace was almost empty, except for the guards at the entrance.

In truth, people were not needed for the palace's defense, as the magical barrier did the job.

Nevertheless, the most important people remained.

"Your Highness, you have returned."

"I can't be called that anymore, but yes, I have returned."

The master of ceremonies was there, the person in charge of all internal management of the palace.

Though he wasn't someone who went outside, he remained in his position, taking care of the palace's operations.

The empty palace became mine with just a single step.

To be precise, from here on, it was Charlotte's responsibility, not mine.

Charlotte, naturally, was well-informed about the palace's situation and would quickly grasp the palace's operations.

So, I had nothing to do.

Olivia and I walked through the central Imperial Palace, Tetra.

The central palace was solemn, quiet, and vast.

Olivia gazed at the high ceiling of the central palace.

"It doesn't feel… real."

"I agree."

We had raced towards the end of the war.

But the events that unfolded after the war's end were so consecutive that it felt like a dream.

I had only thought about getting here safely, and the tasks that followed seemed overwhelming.

The emperor's palace, which was once unapproachable, was now mine.

But it didn't make me happy.

"Is it… overwhelming because I'm too small?"

Olivia seemed to feel more overwhelmed and distant than accomplished, looking at the huge palace.

"I feel the same."

This palace alone was huge, but the world was incomparably larger.

Our words would make the world turn, and a single mistake could be irreversible.

There would be divisions, mergers, and conflicts at times.

Just as I took on a central role, Olivia also held a massive responsibility.

She bore the heavy mission of unifying all those who believed in the Five Great Gods and carrying out religious reforms.

So both Olivia and I couldn't help but feel the pressure.

"Still… we've managed to come this far."

Olivia hugged me quietly.

"We can't lie that there will only be happy moments."

“…Yes."

"Still, let's believe that we can do well. We've managed somehow so far. We'll manage somehow in the future too."

The girl who had once rejected religion was now forced to do what she had never wanted to do.

It was all because I had wished it upon her.

I had always been the one to receive.

Even now, I could only give her, "Thank you. Always."

Having no reason not to be grateful to her, I hugged Olivia tightly.

As if I was trembling a bit.

Olivia, who was hugging me, was definitely trembling too.

Still, we had to believe that things would turn out well.

Just as a sense of defeat would inevitably lead to failure.

Because a despairing vision would bring only despair.

We had to believe that things would turn out well.

How much time had passed?

Summoned by the attendants, Olivia and I headed to the Emperor's office. Charlotte tidied up the piled documents on the desk and placed them neatly on the right side.

"You just need to come and sit down."

“…Is that all?"

"Yes."

Though Charlotte knew most of the matters, Bertus had made sure to hand over

everything properly before he left.

"It seems like most of the core bureaucrats knew what would happen next. You can just summon them and have them continue their work. Of course, there will be those who are scared and run away, but even in those cases, it's already arranged who to appoint as successors."

The administration was not left in a void.

Bertus had arranged everything in advance so that the situation would be maintained just by my presence.

"That doesn't mean the situation is good. The absolute famine issue is still severe, and of course, there's the resentment against the empire, as well as the opposition and uprisings that will occur when you ascend the throne. Those aren't problems Bertus can solve for us. We'll have to figure it out ourselves."

As the war continued, people became increasingly exhausted.

We could take over the empire.

But the crumbling empire embraced countless problems.

We were not drinking from a poisoned chalice, but swallowing the poison itself.

Taking over the empire wasn't easy, nor was managing it.

We had inherited a sandcastle on the verge of collapse.

Although we could operate the empire through the remaining bureaucrats, the challenge of stabilizing the imperial capital remained.

Would everything be over once the imperial capital was stabilized?

There were still issues with the imperial territories and the vassal states.

We would have to begin winning their complete obedience and providing assistance for them to become self-sufficient.

"The one silver lining is that when the allied forces withdraw, we can use the

resources that would have gone to the military for the imperial capital. Originally, this situation would have lasted for about another year. It's a blessing in disguise, I suppose."

The quick withdrawal of the allied forces meant the preservation of resources.

The existence of Harriet was of great help to us and to everyone in the world.

Truly, Harriet had become the greatest mage in history, not only for humanity but for all races.

Charlotte stared blankly out the window after finishing her words.

I couldn't help but know what she was thinking.

She must have been thinking about Bertus, who had disappeared.

After completing all the preparations, Bertus disappeared.

No, he had fled.

However, neither Charlotte nor I had expected Bertus to flee.

Somehow, it seemed like he had resolved himself in a different way than we had anticipated.

"Actually, this might be better. People will hate the emperor who ran away, and then they can easily let go of their attachment to the Gardias royal family."

If the emperor had been executed, there might have been those who believed in his innocence.

But the fact that the emperor had fled would lead to the disappearance of any last lingering attachment to him.

So, Charlotte would have thought it was fortunate that Bertus had escaped and was still alive. Just like I was thinking now.

However, neither Charlotte nor I could be certain whether Bertus had really thought that way when he fled.

"We can't pinpoint the whereabouts of Christina, Louis, and Anna. We probably won't be able to find them. We'll have to check on their situation eventually. The facilities for creating immortals have all been destroyed, and it's impossible for individuals to rebuild them, but we can't know for sure."

We needed to find out if Christina was really dead, and if she was, whether the other two were dead as well.

We couldn't rule out that possibility either.

And what had happened to Ludwig?

On top of that, there was the issue with Antirianus.

Not everything had been resolved yet, and I didn't know everything.

The list of things to do kept growing, as did the responsibilities I had to bear.

Two weeks had passed since the battle of Diane.

During that time, Charlotte had managed the overall affairs of the empire.

The allied forces began to return slowly under Harriet's guidance.

As soon as they returned, word would spread across the continent that the Gate incident had ended in victory for the allied forces.

And the story of the empire's betrayal and the Demon King would also spread.

The people of each region would deal with the ensuing chaos on their own.

Conflicting claims would arise between those who rejected me and those who had seen me directly in the allied forces, which would lead to numerous conflicts across the continent.

I couldn't handle everything at once.

I hoped that the leaders of humanity would carry out my words properly.

For now, I didn't know about anything else, but at least they should eat well and live well.

Governing them in practice would come later.

It was already difficult enough to manage the affairs of the empire.

After the withdrawal of the allied forces, the complete end of the Gate incident was announced in the empire.

All forces had returned to the empire.

And then.

The story of the Demon King swallowing up the empire would spread simultaneously.

A joy so great that it would quell all the confusion that had arisen thus far.

And a strange story that would suddenly make that joy seem bizarre.

The betrayal of the empire and the reign of the Demon King.

It was a story that would inevitably be revealed someday.

A black propaganda campaign began.

The Gate incident was actually caused by the emperor, and the Demon King had been trying to protect humanity.

That was the gist of the content.

In the central palace Tetra's conference room.

Me.

Harriet.

Charlotte.

Olivia.

Airi, who had been summoned from the Edina Archipelago.

Liana.

Sarkegaar.

The Vampire Lords, excluding Antirianus.

Rowan, the commander of the Holy Knights.

And finally, Louise von Schwarz.

In other words, all those who would have to take on the role of the real power in my regime from now on were gathered together.

If only Archduke Saint Owan had been here, but he had returned to his duchy with his army, leaving behind the words that he would entrust everything to his daughter.

“…Honestly, I wouldn't believe it either."

At my words, everyone gathered in the room slowly nodded in agreement.

The black propaganda.

To be frank, it was too obvious.

It was nothing more than a new regime attempting to justify its rule by slandering the previous one.

"But we can't just not do it, can we?"

At Olivia's words, I nodded. Whether people believed it or not, it was a good thing for me if even a few more people believed it.

"The testimony of those who saw you fight in the allied forces will serve as evidence."

The unbelievable black propaganda.

Real combatants would testify to it.

That would give it some degree of persuasiveness, and I agreed with Charlotte's opinion that it would be enough.

Charlotte began her explanation.

"The affairs of various parts of the continent are not yet at the stage where we can intervene. First and foremost, our goal should be to support and stabilize the Imperial Capital."

"Over time, a significant portion of the forces that returned to their homeland will likely harbor different intentions."

"Many of them may refuse to accept our rule when we start functioning as an empire. This could be the position of the rulers, or a result of representing the oppressed."

"However, there isn't a single force in the whole continent that can invade the Imperial Capital with military power. So, their resentment can only reject our rule but cannot pose any substantial threat to us."

"Securing political legitimacy will be difficult. However, once they become dependent on us, obedience will follow."

"Dependence doesn't always require force; it could come from our strength, resources, or technology."

"In the long run, we can subdue the entire continent under the empire through economic means rather than political or military ones. Once they are well-fed, denying our rule would mean creating a situation where everything falls apart."

"Everyone may hate us, but if we make them realize that everything they enjoy would disappear without us, we can rule them."

"Fortunately, we have the blueprint for the new warp gate."

With those words, Charlotte looked at Harriet, who nodded in response.

The new warp gate.

It was the second button for us to rule the entire continent.

"First, let's focus on stabilizing the Imperial Capital."

"Then, we'll restore and redesign the warp gates throughout the continent to economically integrate it. If we control the warp gates, no one can defy us."

Living a peaceful life by miserably submitting to the Demon King.

So, we would subdue them economically rather than militarily.

In the end, economic prosperity would accelerate the reconstruction of civilization.

The moment we possess the warp gate, the leash of the entire continent would fall into our hands just by having control over it.

We briefly discussed the path we should take in the future.

"There might be situations where we actually have to use force. Food supply is tight, and we need to worry about Edina's issues. So, let's stay in the Imperial Palace for the time being. We never know when or where a situation may require our presence."

The Imperial Capital was like a boiling pot.

With the potential for an emergency to break out at any time, we had to stay within the Imperial Capital for now.

CHAPTER 679

On the terrace of the third floor of the Central Palace, Tetra.

Even though a turbulent political climate was about to begin, the chaos didn't reach the Central Palace.

It had been quite some time since Harriet and I had shared a cup of tea together.

"Haah… I still can't believe it. I don't even know what's happening…"

Just as Olivia felt bewildered, Harriet too seemed to be in the same state as she let out a deep sigh.

Despite saying that, Harriet had shortened astronomical costs and time by using her magic.

In fact, she had annihilated a tremendous number of monsters with that magic and saved countless people.

If one were to list the great mages in history, Harriet would be among the first.

As time passed, it would only become more evident.

From now on, practically all decisions would be made by Charlotte. My role was to approve or disapprove of them.

During the war, we were the busiest, but now Charlotte would be the busiest.

Although Harriet was exceptionally talented, she lacked experience in politics.

It was best for mine and Harriet's powers not to be used now. Of course, once the political situation stabilized, Harriet would have to step forward to construct new warp gates.

In many ways, Harriet had become an indispensable presence.

With her arms crossed, Harriet gazed out the window.

Where had the arrogance and disdain in her eyes gone?

Now, they were filled with worry and deep thoughts. Concern and fear about what would happen next and what had already transpired were evident.

How much time had passed while we drank tea?

Harriet's gaze seemed to gradually settle.

I couldn't tell what she was thinking.

"Reinhardt."

Suddenly, Harriet called my name.

“…Huh?"

"We need to talk."

At that single sentence,

I unknowingly felt chills run down my spine.

"Uh, um… uh…”

I awkwardly got up from my seat, watching Harriet rise from hers.

Somehow,

Something about that phrase…

It was damn scary!

We were talking in the first place, but saying we need to talk made me feel like I was going crazy!

Was she talking about something other than this? Right?

Trembling with an inexplicable fear, I followed Harriet as she walked somewhere.

Was it not appropriate to talk in the place where we were sitting?

Harriet led me to a door, flung it open, glanced around, and gestured for me to enter.

It was a bedroom, but I couldn't tell who it belonged to.

It wasn't the emperor's bedroom I had been staying in since arriving at Tetra.

It was one of the many empty rooms, just like the countless others that were vacant.

-Creak

As I entered, Harriet closed the door and locked it.

Wait…

Wait?

Why lock it?

Was she trying to prevent me from escaping? Leaning against the door, Harriet looked at me.

"…"

And Harriet silently stared at me who was paralyzed with fear.

We need to talk.

I realized anew that this short phrase was more terrifying than any declaration of war.

Was there a problem?

Did I do something wrong?

What should I do?

I racked my brain to figure out if I had done anything upsetting or wrong in the midst of the hectic recent events, but I couldn't figure it out.

When I thought about it, there were countless things that might have upset her.

I had not attended to what I should have, and it wasn't that I hadn't done anything wrong. Rather, there were too many wrongs to even guess at.

My heart pounded.

“…Are you scared?"

"Huh…?"

Harriet asked, seemingly reading my expression.

Scared, of course.

In my life, I couldn't count how many times I had been scared.

But experiencing an unknown fear like today was a first for me.

I didn't know why I should be scared, but I just was.

Not exactly scared, more like…

Tense.

Incredibly tense.

Couldn't she just tell me what I did wrong?

I was confident I would kneel!

If I admitted my wrongdoing and knelt, I would be asked what I had done wrong!

With such a history of wrongdoing, I wouldn't know where to start if a resentful word came out of that mouth!

"Aren't you going to answer?"

Harriet asked quietly.

Why was she doing this…

Why did she suddenly start acting this way?

Wasn't this what I used to do to other kids during my days at the temple?

"I'm, I'm scared… I'm scared…”

In response to Harriet's question, I could only nod with a flustered expression.

At my admission of fear, Harriet tilted her head.

"Why are you scared?"

I felt like I was going crazy.

Like I was losing my mind!

"Well, you… you're not usually like this…”

From a certain point on, it became impossible for me to be harsher than necessary with her!

I felt both apologetic and grateful.

And so.

And so…

"Shouldn't I be like this?"

"No… It's not that you shouldn't…”

Harriet approached me with a subtle smile.

As she came closer, I backed away until I had no choice but to sit down on the bed.

Harriet looked down at me, sitting there.

With that subtle smile.

"Are you scared of being scolded by me?"

Scolded.

The word was cute, but the thought of it was terrifying.

Harriet had never been truly angry with me, save for the beginning of the first semester when we were not yet close.

It wasn't just that she didn't get angry.

From some point on, she always understood me, accepted me, and did something for me.

The thought of that Harriet getting angry and pointing out all my wrongdoings made my vision blur.

I didn't even know what to say to apologize.

"Uh… I'm scared."

So, I had no choice but to nod my head.

If she came at me like that, I might really bite my tongue and die.

Harriet asked again.

"Why are you scared when there's nothing to be scolded for?"

It seemed like I was the only one taking this seriously.

What did she want to say?

Of course, there must be a reason to be scolded.

But still…

It's scary when someone who never got angry gets angry.

Like that.

It wouldn't matter if someone completely unrelated got angry at me…

"Because it's you."

Not just anyone.

Because it couldn't be.

Wouldn't it be scary if such a person got angry?

Did she like the words that slipped out in a panic?

Harriet straddled the bed, sitting on top of me.

Pressing her body close to mine, she stared into my eyes, our noses almost touching.

Why was it like this…?!

However, actions and words were so different.

"I've been away from my family for too long."

"Is that… so?"

"So, now that I'm almost done with what I have to do…"

Harriet glanced out the window for a moment.

"I want to go back to the kingdom for a few years. You don't need me right now either."

Those words felt like a stone dropped onto my heart.

I understood.

Certainly, I knew what she meant.

She had no choice but to feel that way.

I knew Harriet really loved her family and missed them.

But so suddenly?

Not just for a short while, but for a few years?

Harriet asked, "Can I do that?"

"…"

She had already done more than enough.

She had done so much that it couldn't possibly be more.

And what Harriet had done for me was something no one else could do but her.

To ask for more…

Wasn't it too much?

She wasn't leaving forever.

When needed, she would return.

But of course, she wouldn't always be by my side, as close as she was now.

She had always been within reach.

She had always been in a position where I could talk to her, as if it were natural.

She had been the first to listen to my stories and watched my struggles up close.

It meant she wouldn't live like she had all this time.

Is that okay?

She wasn't trying to scold me.

She was asking for permission.

Harriet spoke of parting at a distance so close that we could feel each other's breath.

Harriet asked, "Do you hate it?"

Of course, I hated it.

That…

I hated it.

But demanding more, asking her to stay by my side as if it were natural, wasn't that too much?

However, in the end…

"I hate… it, of course."

My answer was pathetic, but that was all I could say.

It was an acknowledgment of something.

At my response, Harriet smiled.

I wondered if she could smile like this, a smile I had never seen before.

Harriet pressed her body closer to me.

And before I could say anything more, Harriet overlapped her lips with mine.

In that overwhelming moment, how long did we kiss?

Harriet pulled away from me.

She looked at me and smiled.

"I knew, actually."

"What…?"

She whispered quietly into my ear, smiling.

"That if I did this… you wouldn't be able to push me away."

"From some point, I knew that if I spoke a little firmly, you couldn't stay still."

"I thought it was because you were sorry, but…"

"It's not just because I'm sorry. I knew that from some point."

"I knew how to do it long ago."

"But… that's cowardly."

"It's cheap."

"So, I didn't do it."

"But… I don't want to do that forever."

"Now I want to be cowardly and cheap too."

"Now, I'll do things my way."

I couldn't understand what Harriet was saying while listening.

"Marry me."

Harriet whispered into my ear.

"Otherwise, I will never see you again."

Was that what she meant when she said she knew what to say?

Marriage.

The moment she said that, my feelings became strange.

If I didn't agree to marry her, she would leave.

Was this… her way of threatening me?

"But, wait…”

"Don't tell me, you don't want to?"

Harriet's expression began to change.

No, it wasn't that.

It wasn't about whether I wanted to or not.

“…Would you have not done it if I hadn't agreed?"

“…What?"

At my question, Harriet was clearly flustered.

"No, I mean… would you have not done it?"

I had been scared for a moment when she mentioned leaving.

But now I was the one feeling perplexed.

"Of course, we have to do it."

At my words, Harriet's face turned red, as if she couldn't understand the situation.

Marriage.

Wasn't it something we were destined to do?

"So… it was… that kind of… thing?"

I wasn't sure what she had been thinking. Had she thought that maybe we wouldn't go through with it?

Gathering her courage to ask, Harriet's lips trembled.

Just as if she had forgotten her bold move moments ago.

"Of course, we have to. We must."

"Uh, ah… um, yes…"

At my affirmation, Harriet's face finally flushed.

Our blockhead.

Finally.

You.

This girl finally.

Made me say such words.

And even worse ones.

"And… this might be a strange thing to say, but…"

"…What?"

"Will I… only be doing that with you…?"

It seemed she finally realized it was a little different than she had imagined. The blockhead's expression hardened.

"With, with you and… uh… Charlotte and… Olivia too… are you going to do that?"

Of course!

I'm an emperor!

I have to create power through marriage if necessary.

I might even have to do more than that!

Whether or not I did it wasn't up to me. It was bound to happen!

Now it would be strange if I didn't!

"Ah… I see… that kind of… thing… I see… of course…”

Harriet nodded blankly.

Then her expression gradually cooled.

In the end, it was still a piece of trashy talk.

In front of her, who had mustered the courage to suggest marriage.

Yeah, I'll do it with you and with others too.

I said such a thing.

In the end, Harriet, who was on top of me, had a resentful expression.

And finally.

Thud!

"Uh… ah…”

She began to choke me.

"Ye, I knew it…! You, you! I hate you so much!"

Tears welled up in her eyes.

"I really hate you the most in the world!"

In a situation where there were no words to say even if I had ten mouths, I had no choice but to let her choke me.

"Then! Do it with me first! I said do it with me first, you trash!"

Harriet screamed as if she would die on the spot if she didn't do it like that.

CHAPTER 680

Central Palace Tetra, the Emperor's office.

“…You've got to be kidding me."

Harriet and Reinhardt, who had arrived first thing in the morning.

That was all Charlotte could say in response to Harriet and Reinhardt's words.

At Charlotte's icy response, not only Harriet, but also Reinhardt turned pale.

"Well, I guess we have to do it. It's the right thing to do. It's obvious. Marriage is your duty, your job, your state affair. I'm glad you understand that."

Marriage.

Just as Reinhardt had insisted the day before, it had to be done.

There was no longer an option not to.

The only uncertainty was how many more times it would have to be done.

Charlotte, too, was fully aware of this and might have thought she needed to do even more than agree.

"You, of course, have to do it with Olivia Lanze, and with Airi, too. It might be a bit difficult, but you might have to force yourself to do it with Liana, too. It's a situation where even if we created nonexistent people and forced them into a marriage alliance, it still wouldn't be enough…”

"What are you talking about! Li, Liana is not included!"

"If it needs to be done, it will be done."

Reinhardt was startled by Charlotte, who was adding fuel to the fire, and Harriet's face began to turn blue.

"But… still… still…!"

"You're saying you're going to pick and choose your duties now? According to your circumstances?"

As Charlotte's expression grew colder, Reinhardt froze.

Just as she said, Reinhardt might now have to marry someone he hated so much he'd rather die, regardless of whether it was a good or bad match.

So Reinhardt never really had a choice.

If it had to be done, it would be done, and if it shouldn't, then it couldn't.

"Th, that… that's… not it, but…"

"Well, Liana was just an example. There's no need to go that far. Anyway, you have to get married. Quite a lot."

Charlotte didn't say she was shocked because Reinhardt said he was going to marry them.

The part that shocked Charlotte was something else.

Charlotte's cold gaze was directed not at Reinhardt, but at Harriet.

"But what, you want to go first?"

"Is… is that not okay?"

Harriet hesitated and cautiously added to Charlotte's words.

Marriage.

She could bear the idea of him marrying this person and that person.

But she wanted to be the first one he married.

That was, arguably, Harriet's last shred of pride.

"Didn't I just say marriage is a state affair?"

"Ye, yes, you did…"

"A 'ceremony' of state affairs, right?"

"Yes…"

"Of course, 'expenses' are involved in such ceremonies, right?"

At that point, both Harriet and Reinhardt had no choice but to understand what Charlotte was getting at.

"Do you think we can afford to hold this event multiple times, considering our circumstances? Do you want to ruin a country that hasn't even begun by holding separate weddings?"

"Then, how about a simple…"

Charlotte's expression distorted at Reinhardt's cautious suggestion.

"…Do you think the wedding of the Emperor of the New Empire can be held in a simple way? Do you want rumors to spread that we're a frugal empire, a worthless empire?"

"Is… is that how it is?"

"Fortunately, given the current circumstances, it's not a flaw to hold such an event on a smaller scale. It's fine even if it's modest. However, the reason the Emperor's wedding is a national affair is not because it signifies the union of two individuals, but because it announces the alliance of two powers. It's all about making that known. Do you think an Emperor or a King would hold a wedding ceremony in a modest manner, inviting only known individuals, or secretly on a small scale? What do you think this is, some covert operation?"

Charlotte sighed, as if even thinking about it was giving her a headache.

"How many years do you think we'd need to hold a proper wedding ceremony with each and every one of you?"

"I have no idea……."

"We'd first need to restore the economy to a state where the Emperor's wedding ceremony wouldn't impact the national economy, right?"

"Are you saying… we'd die of old age while preparing for the wedding?"

"You got it."

Charlotte gave Harriet and Reinhardt a frosty look.

Saying you want to go first means you want to do it separately. But that wasn't possible in our current situation.

"Well, good. Since it's been brought up, we need to sort this out now."

Charlotte pulled out a blank piece of paper and began to write something.

After completing the writing swiftly, she handed the paper over to Reinhardt.

As expected, it contained a list of names.

"Go and deliver the message."

"Message…? What message?"

"…Stop playing dumb."

At Charlotte's threatening demeanor, Reinhardt asked again, his face pale.

"So, you're saying… right now… announce the wedding? Go find these people? Right now?"

Reinhardt bulged his eyes, looking at the names written on the document.

As Charlotte saw the bewildered Reinhardt and Harriet, she tilted her head in confusion.

"Are you two getting married?"

"Well, uh……”

"Are you marrying me as well?"

"Well, uh… yeah… yes."

"And others as well?"

"Uh……”

The wedding was inevitable. And it was going to be with many others. And the parties involved understood and accepted this.

And having separate ceremonies was incredibly challenging under the current circumstances.

So what exactly was the problem?

"Then, if we're going to do it anyway, we should do it all at once."

All at once, with everyone.

At that statement, Harriet and Reinhardt's mouths slightly dropped open.

"No, but… that's……”

Seeing their expressions, Charlotte smirked.

Charlotte pointed at the door with her finger.

"Once you understand, go and deliver the message to the people listed there."

"We're all getting married on the same day, at the same time, at the same place."

"Let's make the day of the ceremony the founding day."

"Especially, tell this to Olivia Lanze."

"If she wants to grow old and die while preparing for separate weddings, she can refuse."

Charlotte's bold decision to hold the wedding and founding ceremony simultaneously left not only Harriet but also Reinhardt unable to think of anything else but that this was absurd.

Even so, holding the multiple weddings of the Emperor, which were necessary, separately during this perilous time would only waste national resources unnecessarily, and it wasn't even possible.

The economy would collapse because of the wedding.

Charlotte's judgement was economic and rational.

The problem was only that it was inhumane.

Reinhardt and Harriet came to discuss the future wedding plans of the Emperor, but all they got was a response asking if they wanted to die waiting for separate ceremonies.

"We're all getting married at the same time on the same day."

That was Charlotte's response.

"But… that means…"

"What?"

"No matter how you look at it…"

Certainly.

Reinhardt's gaze was stuck on one of the names written on the document, unable to look away.

Watching Reinhardt's shock, Charlotte's expression turned icy.

"What did I tell you about marriage just now?"

"You said it was a state affair."

"Do you want to neglect your duties?"

The newly appointed emperor, who came to discuss marriage and ended up receiving a list of people he needed to marry, left the office looking as if he'd lost his soul.

Looking at the bewildered Harriet in the face of the oncoming storm-like situation, Charlotte smiled.

It was a subtle smirk.

"Hmm, if the financial situation had been better, you could have monopolized him for a year. What a pity."

"Well…"

Harriet couldn't help but blush even more at Charlotte's blatant comment.

"You're cheeky. But you certainly have the right to be."

"…"

Harriet knew that the emperor, who was not just a simple king, would inevitably face such situations, and even Reinhardt had directly discussed it.

However, neither Reinhardt nor Harriet expected all of these things to come crashing down at once.

However.

The reason for Reinhardt's pale face.

"But… is this okay?"

Harriet had also seen the names written on the paper. That's why Harriet was also looking pale.

This seemed a bit out of line.

Because there was such a name.

"It's a duty, so we have to do it. What can we do? This might be the end? Depending

on the situation, we might have to do it a few more times."

Not three times, not four times, but several times.

They couldn't know how many more marriages they would have to have in the future.

Of course, it was a necessary thing to do.

But because there was also a side where it seemed like she was being mischievous.

"Shall we follow him around and watch in secret?"

"Don't do that!"

Charlotte laughed for a while, imagining the scene.

Under the command of Charlotte de Gardias, who was virtually acting as the emperor, the new emperor, Reinhardt, roamed aimlessly around the central palace Tetra.

He had to get married.

A lot.

Often.

Quite a bit.

For anyone else, marriage for the emperor had to come with those qualifiers.

He knew it, and he knew it was something he had to do.

But without any mental preparation, all at once.

All together.

The emperor hadn't anticipated that.

The first person the emperor visited was Olivia Lanze.

"…"

"…"

When his half-dead-looking, babbling explanation ended, Olivia Lanze's expression had turned icy.

"I've often thought that I might not be able to marry you. But I never imagined it would happen like this. Group marriage? What is that?"

She looked like someone so upset that she wanted to break something.

For the first time in a long time, Olivia Lanze was truly angry.

"Since I'm going to tear apart and rewrite the doctrine of the Holy Order according to my taste, whether or not I get married is up to me."

As long as she understood that the gods and doctrines were just accessories that could be used as earrings or nose rings, she could easily do away with the old-fashioned custom of the High Priest of Purity not being able to marry.

Reinhardt was apprehensive, wondering if he was about to receive a resounding slap on the cheek.

Olivia scanned Reinhardt's face quietly.

"Do you feel sorry?"

"…"

"Why are you sorry? In fact, it's inevitable, isn't it? I'm just in a bad mood. There's nothing we can do about it……"

It was, in the end, a matter of fate.

"Haah… Yes. It's lucky that it turned out this way, no one died. We shouldn't be too greedy… And, if I refuse now, I might grow old and die…? Is this some kind of nonsensical threat?"

Upon hearing Charlotte's message, Olivia scowled as if displeased.

If she insisted on doing it separately, she might be able to do it later when they could afford it.

"By then, the child might have even enrolled in the temple……”

Olivia seemed to imagine what would happen if she did not accept this proposal.

It was not something that Olivia could stop by asking him not to do it, nor was it something that could happen just because she asked for it.

But it was inevitable to feel bad.

Even though she accepted it as something inevitable.

It was a fact that Olivia Lanze was in a very bad mood at the moment.

"I'll be watching how you handle this."

Olivia Lanze looked at Reinhardt with a chilly gaze.

Although it was inevitable now.

"If you upset me in the future, I'll make you regret being alive. Got it?"

"Uh, yes… I understand…”

The cold look in Olivia Lanze's eyes told him that her words were far from false.

She would make him the most tired and difficult person in the world.

Even before they were married, Olivia had declared she would scratch him at every opportunity.

The Demon King, who had been half-dead in the morning, was squashed by afternoon, knocking on Airi's door.

"Demonkind may follow the Archdemon, but that doesn't mean we're devoid of feelings."

As if it were a matter of course, Airi commented and nodded her head at Reinhardt's explanation.

"So, if your wives are filled with humans only, it will also work as a dissatisfaction for the demons. So, it's certainly meaningful that I'm included."

Airi nodded lightly as if she understood what it meant.

"Are you… making this decision too easily…?"

Reinhardt was at a loss for words at Airi's reaction, which seemed to be not accepting the marriage but justifying it.

"Charlotte's right. You need to get married more. But filling it with humans alone isn't balanced. Wouldn't it be better to consider looking for suitable people among the demons?"

"Huh…?"

"What about Sarkegaar? Since the fall of Darkland, he's been playing a decisive role, so there's nothing to criticize. He can transform into any form you want anyway."

"Uh, uh… Sarkegaar…?"

Reinhardt's face turned pale at the mention of a name unrelated to the one Charlotte had written down, an utterly unexpected name.

That side might respond too fiercely, which could be a problem.

"Or how about looking for the surviving Dreadfiend clan? If you gather the demons left in Darkland, it should be good. The Mermaid Queen too… though physically it might be a bit difficult? I've heard that there are some mermaids who can live on land occasionally…"

"Um, uh… Excuse me…?"

"There was an Archdemon who married an Orc."

"Just… Just swear at me!"

"Come to think of it, there's Eleris too."

“…What?"

"Valier, aren't you technically the closest to Eleris among us?"

In actuality, only a handful knew that Eleris was an ancient Archdemon, and Airi was not one of them.

Reinhardt could only turn as pale as a vampire.

"Do, don't talk nonsense! That, that's… That's absolutely not possible!"

“…Because she's undead, it's not possible?"

"No, no, it just can't be!"

"…?"

In the end, Airi made a comment that made the Demon King want to vomit blood.

'I'll slowly look for a suitable demon bride for you.'

Reinhardt, as if fleeing, escaped from Airi's room and headed to the next location.

In truth, he thought that what was bound to happen later had just come a bit earlier.

But he never expected this.

Reinhardt could say that for sure.

Why did it have to go this far?

Why did it need to go this far?

However, in the end, he couldn't avoid it.

-Knock, knock

Reinhardt knocked on someone's door.

A moment later, the door cautiously opened.

-Squeak

“…Is there a meeting?"

Louise von Schwarz tilted her head as she looked at the Demon King.

"Uh… um…”

If there was a suicide button, he would've pressed it right then.

"Should, should… should we… uh, ta, talk…?"

Reinhardt thought so.

"Yes, anytime."

Louise nodded her head.

CHAPTER 681

Louise von Schwarz remained in the Imperial Palace as a pivotal figure in the Demon King's army.

Though she needed to return to her homeland as soon as possible, her essential role in the Demon King's army meant she had to familiarize herself with all the necessary aspects of the Imperial Palace.

Louise quietly observed Reinhardt, who sat frozen in his chair.

Despite their lengthy period of cooperation, Louise's interactions with the Demon King were mostly conducted through Rowan, leaving her without much personal acquaintance.

The first time she saw his face directly was at a general command meeting, just before the withdrawal of the Allied Forces.

Since then, she had seen him a few times after entering the Imperial Palace, but this was the first time they had met alone and conversed.

Despite being a vital and closely tied collaborator, Louise was practically a stranger to the Demon King.

In comparison, Heinrich probably knew him better.

"This is our first meeting like this," she noted.

"Yes… it is," he agreed.

Observing the frozen Demon King, Louise cocked her head.

"Why don't you speak more comfortably? You're set to become the Emperor of the entire continent, and I am clearly here to serve you," she suggested.

She wondered if Reinhardt was cautious around her because he considered her a friend's older sister.

Could it be that a being above all should freeze just because the person in front of them is slightly older?

Had the stories about the Demon King she heard from Heinrich been somewhat distorted?

He seemed far from the ruffian Heinrich had described, appearing instead somewhat pitiful, which was amusing. With a temperament like this, the future of the new Empire seemed uncertain.

While she might not like Rowan, Louise held no animosity towards the Demon King.

On the contrary, she was grateful to him, for he was the one who attempted to save Heinrich from the brink of death.

And since he was the one who ended the Gate incident and brought them to this point, she couldn't help but view him as a grand figure.

Still, why was he trembling with such anxiety?

She couldn't understand why.

Contrary to what she had heard, could it be that the Demon King was actually quite timid?

Louise wondered if she needed to revise her perception of him.

Finally, after much hesitation, the Demon King spoke.

"Um… about that."

“…About what?"

"Well… I have something… I want to tell you…”

She felt a strong urge to urge him to speak already.

Considering he was set to become an Emperor, she found his lack of confidence astonishing. This Empire felt incredibly precarious.

"About… marriage…"

With that single word, Louise instantly grasped the situation.

Why the Demon King had been so frozen.

Why he was so hesitant.

As soon as she heard the word he had finally managed to blurt out, she had no choice but to understand.

Louise stared at the Demon King.

She didn't need much time to deliberate.

The new Empire could hardly be considered stable.

Therefore, they needed to build alliances with numerous groups, sometimes placing them beneath their feet to establish a foundation.

Thus, it would be beneficial to establish more than just an alliance with the Schwarz royal family, which was the number two nation.

And intertwining with the royal family of the new Empire was a necessary task for the heir of the Schwarz royal family.

For the new Empire.

For the survival of the royal family.

And with this single choice, Louise, who would become a citizen of the Empire, would separate from the Schwarz royal family, confirming Heinrich's ascension to the Schwarz throne.

Louise was joining the Empire with a legitimate and certain justification.

And likewise, Heinrich became the king of Kernstadt with a valid and sole reason.

A situation she had imagined, but wasn't sure how to make possible, had become achievable quite effortlessly.

For her, it was more than a good thing, it was something she simply had to do.

"There's no reason not to do what's necessary," Louise declared, nodding her head.

"Thank you in advance."

Somehow, with a very business-like demeanor, Louise extended her hand. The Demon King grabbed it with a flustered expression.

"I, um! I, I! I should be thanking you!"

Louise looked at the Demon King with wide eyes, incredulous at such a character. But that was only for a moment.

She took a moment to take a deep breath. There was something the other party needed to know, even if it was something she had to do.

"But there is something you should be aware of."

"Ah…"

"It's about Heinrich."

The Demon King, swallowing nervously, nodded with a stern expression.

"I, know… about it."

"Ah… I see."

Louise said nothing more.

Could this be what it feels like to have your soul sucked out?

No, it seemed more like it was shattered.

"…You really did it."

Upon hearing that the mission was completed, Charlotte looked astounded, her eyes

wide and her hand covering her mouth.

"You told me to…!"

"I didn't think you'd actually do it. How shameless can you be?"

This.

This!

After asking me to do it, how could you be surprised that I did!

Regardless of anything else.

Regardless of anything else!

I couldn't believe the day had come when I had to do such crazy things…

What the hell is an emperor!

I don't want to do it! I already feel like I'm going crazy not wanting to do it!

"So, she accepted?"

"…Without even hesitating."

I am getting married.

And quite a lot, at that.

Even with someone I never even imagined.

And I'm going to have to keep doing this sort of marriage.

I agree with Charlotte's saying that for someone like me, marriage is a job.

But ending up married to everyone in the end.

I knew that day would come eventually, but now that it's suddenly right in front of me, I feel like I'm going crazy.

It's too scary.

What's going to happen to me?

I'm already dizzy, how much more dizzy will I get?

"Don't worry about the preparations, I'll handle everything."

Charlotte seemed to say she would take care of scheduling or other issues.

For some reason.

She seemed to enjoy tormenting me.

Charlotte looked at me and grinned.

It's been overflowing with malice since this morning.

"So, only the last hurdle remains, right?"

"The last…? There's more…?"

"No, as for the people you have to marry, it ends here for now. But as a matter of courtesy…"

As Charlotte approached me with a sinister smile, she whispered softly in my ear.

"You should tell Heinrich yourself, out of courtesy, right?"

"Uh…?"

"You should tell him you're marrying his mother."

"!!!!!"

I bit my tongue, but unfortunately, I didn't die.

After the Allied Forces returned in large numbers, all the temple-origin fighters had

gone back to the Temple, and Heinrich was no exception.

With the end of the Gate War and the aftermath spreading, the whole continent was boiling over, and the Temple was no exception.

Anxiety, despair, fear, and a faint glimmer of hope.

These emotions intertwined, everyone striving to navigate their opaque futures and unsettling realities in their own ways.

And so, I had called Heinrich to the Imperial Palace.

Not in the bedroom or the reception room of the central palace Tetra, but in the garden at the front of Tetra.

Without a single escort.

“…Should I address you as Your Majesty now?"

Heinrich, who had responded to my summons, wore an ambiguous expression.

"No… Just… Continue as before."

"Is something bothering you? Why the long face? Well, I guess it's just the beginning for you. I can't be of much help anymore, being a guy whose only asset is superpower. Do you need something from me?"

"No, it's not that I need something. I just have something I need to say…”

I felt like I was going to vomit.

I wanted to die.

I had considered how to break the news, but there were no answers to be found.

There couldn't possibly be a right answer to something like this.

I abruptly stood from the bench and walked over to Heinrich.

And then, I grabbed his shoulder.

There was no way to do this other than just say it!

"I'm getting married."

"…?"

At my blunt declaration, Heinrich tilted his head in confusion.

"Oh, uh… Congratulations. With whom? Harriet? Charlotte? The Saintess? Or…… could it be… all three…?"

"…"

If one could die from embarrassment.

That time would be now.

-Vroom!

"Look, look at that! Harriet!"

"Ugh… What, what should we do…!"

Charlotte dragged a reluctant Harriet to the window to observe the sudden explosion of fireworks in the garden in front of Tetra.

They were too far away to hear the conversation, but they could clearly see Heinrich, his face flushing red, furiously chasing Reinhardt.

“You, die! Die you bastard!”

Heinrich's furious shout was loud enough to reach the windows of Tetra.

"Isn't this… dangerous?"

"It's fine, he won't die from that."

"You really…”

Few had ever witnessed a war hero trying to kill an emperor, and yet here they were.

"Sigh, at this rate, the grass will burn. What should we do?"

"This isn't the time for that kind of talk!"

Charlotte was laughing and joking as she watched the spectacle.

Everyone was falling apart in their own ways, and Charlotte was no exception.

Finally, the main person of the story, who had been oblivious to the commotion, appeared and personally restrained Heinrich, and only then did the uproar cease.

In the end, Heinrich was taken away by Louise.

I still felt nauseous.

The realization that the guy I used to tease, who could barely make a campfire, could try to kill me, gave me a chill down my spine.

The second floor of Tetra.

After the situation had calmed down, Liana, who had been clueless about the situation, detained me and asked what had happened. I was drinking a cup of tea.

“…Ah."

Having heard the whole story, Liana nodded with a nervous expression.

The absurdity of the situation was enough to startle even Liana, who would usually have been amused.

"But, uh… whether it's necessary or not, it's definitely necessary, so…”

I couldn't say for sure that Charlotte had no ill intentions, but it was clear that this would have happened regardless.

The strongest nation is, of course, the empire, and the second would be Kernstadt.

If these two forces combined, in reality, there would be no power capable of opposing the new empire.

Liana, of course, understood that reinforcing this union was a crucial matter.

It was just a little difficult to accept.

"Speaking of which… so, you're going to marry five people at once?"

“…Yes."

Harriet, Charlotte, Olivia, Airi, and Louis.

He had to marry all five at once.

As Liana counted on her fingers, she suddenly pointed at herself.

"What about me?"

"What?"

"Why am I not included?"

What.

What did she want to do!

She was…

Wait!

Liana furrowed her brow as if she was displeased.

"Do you not need me anymore because you will taste the sweet honey of marrying your friend’s mother? I'm hurt."

"What are you saying! And, don't phrase it like that…!"

"Then what should I call it?"

"But still…!"

Her words were too blunt!

He was already dizzy, did she need to make it worse?

"By the way, I wasn't against the idea of marrying you if you insisted."

"Stop, stop… just stop."

"Well, I guess I wouldn't enjoy the life of a concubine, waiting for an emperor with many wives and staring at doors that never open."

With that, Liana took a sip of her tea.

"In reality, I don't have anything other than my superpowers, so there's no real political benefit."

The grandeur of the Grantz Duke family, which had once ruled the entire continent, had vanished with the death of the Duke of Grantz, Liana's escape, and the Gate incident.

But she was a supernatural who could, perhaps, shake the world at her will.

The reason Charlotte hadn't forced a marriage with Liana was probably that there were no political gains to be had from it.

Of course, if it was beneficial, she'd probably push for it, which was the problem.

Wait.

Why was Charlotte making decisions about my marriage?

Why was I obediently doing as told?

Wasn't this the puppet emperor situation?

Was this right?

As she sipped her tea, Liana looked out the window.

"But, I don't necessarily have to become your wife to help you."

She would continue to be one of the Four Heavenly Kings.

With that, Liana gave a sly smile.

Right.

This was the perfect distance between her and him.

And that was fine in its own way.

CHAPTER 682

Time had passed.

As per Charlotte's plan, the wedding would be a simple affair.

But it was a ceremony laden with profound implications.

It signified not only the proclamation of a new empire but also the formal acknowledgment of humanity's subjugation beneath the Demon King's feet.

The Gardias Imperial family had finally and completely bowed down to the Demon King.

The Emperor had fled.

The last successor of the Gardias Imperial family, Charlotte de Gardias, marrying the Demon King as a demi-human, embodied this surrender.

Louise von Schwarz of Kernstadt, the second most powerful state, also became the Demon King's bride, thus declaring that the Schwarz Kingdom too had come under the Demon King's rule.

Olivia Lanze, too, was to become the Demon King's bride, betraying the teachings of the Saint of Purity, signifying that the five major religious orders had pledged allegiance to the Demon King.

The presence of a demon bride implied that the era of humans and demons would soon unfold.

While the case of Harriet de Saint-Owan might not carry the same weight as the others, those who had seen or heard of her feats in battle knew what it meant.

The world's most powerful mage was to become the Demon King's bride.

With the wedding, a new empire was to be announced.

Chaos was bound to follow.

And whether prosperity or something else lay beyond the chaos, it marked the start of another long and arduous journey.

The night before the wedding.

I was sitting alone in my bedroom.

I wanted to be alone.

"…"

A bottle of whiskey, taken from the display case, sat on the table in front of me.

Drinking the night before the wedding may seem insane, but it held no real significance.

I could sober up whenever I wanted.

I pondered the things I had lost.

It didn't seem much, but it wasn't as if I had lost nothing.

Epinhauser.

Loyar.

The folks from the Rotary Club.

They had become victims of the war, regardless of my victory or defeat.

There was no turning back.

I wondered if they would be happy with the present day.

I wasn't sure.

Next, I thought about the things I didn't know.

Bertus and Saviolin Turner had disappeared.

Shanafel and the royal mages had scattered.

I couldn't find Christina and Ludwig, or Anna and Louis Ancton either.

The Immortal was gone, but the magic that created the Immortal must still exist.

I didn't know what had become of them either.

And then there was Antirianus.

I didn't know whether Antirianus was hiding somewhere, biding his time to strike at me.

The deal had been made, and Antirianus would have tried to kill me.

But I didn't die.

I didn't know why that was.

And then.

Again.

That remark about surviving until after the ending.

I didn't know what it meant.

Was it not after the ending now?

The Gate Incident had ended.

So, what was this ending supposed to be?

If they left me alone for the rest of my life, that would be enough.

What mattered was that no more notifications, like event announcements, were popping up.

There was no information, challenges, or rejections.

I couldn't see any of those things anymore.

Ever since the last rejection, such abilities seemed to have disappeared.

Perhaps just living like this was the only reward I could receive.

If that was the reward, it didn't seem too bad.

It would have been more terrifying if they had tried to take me somewhere now that everything had ended.

The system had disappeared.

As if after the ending, disappearing without a word was some kind of virtue.

The world that remained was entirely mine.

Cheat-like aids, messages, previews.

None of those would exist in my life anymore.

The last preview wasn't malicious.

I had perceived it as a sort of 'get ready to die in vain' sensation.

In reality, it was to inform me that this would happen if I accepted the last deal.

Yes.

That damn candy peddler.

He helped at the decisive last moment.

Things lost remained lost.

Things unknown remained unknown.

Things that ended remained ended.

I had to live the next moment.

After taking a sip of whiskey, I looked out the window.

The pale full moon reflected faintly in my dark bedroom.

Perhaps.

I wasn't sure how much longer I could live.

But in every moment of my remaining life, I would inevitably think of two people when I saw the moon.

Luna.

Ellen.

Even if I could never see them again, I would inevitably think of them when I saw the moon.

Ellen had left, and there was nothing I could do about it.

Being with me was more dangerous.

I knew she left thinking of me.

One day, I would forget.

Just having been pulled out of the pitfall Ellen fell into to save me was already a miracle.

I should be satisfied just for having succeeded beyond the boundary of countless possibilities.

Another sip.

When I swallowed the whiskey, hot breath rose up my throat.

I couldn't remember the last time I had a drink.

Time would cover everything.

Even now, my situation was abundantly rich.

So, there was no reason to think about those who were not here.

They would do something in their place. The guilt would still torment them, they might be hunting monsters.

They would try to do the maximum they could without showing off.

I reached into my pocket and pulled something out.

A round, ivory charm.

A charm engraved with the image of the moon and the sun.

It seemed to have been made by grinding some kind of bone.

Ellen had taken it off, and I had picked it up.

Now it had no meaning.

Whether it actually helped Ellen, she was now free from its constraints.

Of course, it meant nothing to me.

I would never see Ellen again.

I should let go of this foolish attachment for the days to come.

Should I throw it out the window?

Should I break it with a little force?

I pondered for a long time.

A long time.

A long time.

And then I laughed at myself.

I had spent hours deciding whether to discard this trivial thing.

I had no choice but to realize it.

It was a meaningless object.

I couldn't even discard this.

Such a sloppy charm, which had lost all its value.

“…Damn."

I realized under the cold moonlight that letting go of my regrets would be impossible for a lifetime.

So, I took another sip, and another glass.

By the time I had downed two glasses, three glasses, four glasses.

-Knock, Knock

There was a knock.

I wonder if I would hear the voice of a guard announcing a visitor in the future.

Upon opening the door, a familiar face was there.

"Should I call you Your Majesty now?"

"Forget it."

It was Eleris.

"Drinking the night before the wedding, you don't look good."

"What does it matter?"

"I guess so."

Under the moonlight by the window, Eleris and I sat facing each other.

"As per your command, I tried to find traces of Antirianus, but…"

"As expected, there were none?"

"That's right."

Eleris had searched for traces of Antirianus at my behest.

The final battle in Diane.

After that, Antirianus's whereabouts were unknown.

It was clear that there had been a battle after I had fainted, both in terms of time and circumstances.

Could it have been Luna?

But Luna had said she wouldn't help anymore, and she would have meant it.

Still, I couldn't conclusively rule out Luna. She might not have wanted to leave me to die so miserably.

After taking the souls, Antirianus had fought someone.

And then he disappeared. It was unknown whether he was dead or alive.

There were places I could guess, but I had no certainty.

"Fine. The fact that I'm alive is what matters."

Ellen would feel the same.

It was a long journey.

A long and arduous time.

Meeting Charlotte in the Demon King's Castle.

Fleeing to Imperial Capital.

Wandering aimlessly there, overwhelmed.

Through the advice of a monk, I ended up meeting Eleris.

The beginning was the Demon King's Castle, but everything started when I met Eleris.

Facing Eleris on the night before the end of everything felt like destiny.

Eleris silently gazed out the window of the palace.

"I never imagined I would see such a sight from here."

"Me neither. I never wanted to."

"It's strange. A seat that so many would want to occupy, and the person who least wanted it ends up sitting there…"

We both chuckled at that.

Eleris did not want war.

Neither did I.

Neither of us wanted the throne or the reconstruction of Darkland.

I told Eleris to quit being a servant of a ruined country, and Eleris was moved by my aversion to war.

Yet, we were the root cause of all this.

I had explored the Gate incident that wouldn't have happened if I had stayed put.

Eleris had activated Akasha.

There was a war.

And I ended up sitting in a place I did not wish for or want.

If a tragedy occurred because of a person who did not want it, was it all their fault?

Was it okay to avoid responsibility?

Whose sin was it in the end?

Was it me, the root cause of everything?

Was it Eleris, who directly activated Akasha?

Was it Ellen and Charlotte, who dug behind my back instead of trusting me and talking to me?

Was it Bertus, who directly ordered my arrest?

Or was it Antirianus, who insisted that activating Akasha was the answer?

I don't know.

I don't even want to know now.

It's a problem that can't be solved by thinking about it.

And if we knew, then what?

What would it matter if it became clear who was most at fault?

Nothing would change.

Just that everyone shares the guilt.

While it's unclear who is at fault, everyone is saying it's their fault.

And so, everyone met their own end.

I had become the emperor.

Ellen had disappeared.

Charlotte was to become the regent of the new empire.

Bertus had fled.

"……"

Eleris was silent, and I drank a glass of whiskey.

Everyone had reached some sort of conclusion.

Those who held a degree of responsibility for these events each met their own end.

But Eleris had not yet faced any ending.

"Don't go."

"……"

However, there was no way I couldn't know why she had come to see me in the middle of the night, just before my wedding.

She was obviously intending to leave.

Otherwise, she wouldn't be wearing such a sorrowful expression.

"Your Majesty… No, Your Highness… um…… No."

Eleris shook her head.

"Valier."

If she left, Eleris would no longer be my subject.

So she wouldn't need to serve me anymore.

"You don't need me anymore."

Eleris, wearing a sad expression, spoke those words.

There was a time when the presence of Eleris was absolute.

Without Eleris's help, my range of action would have been severely limited.

No, life itself might have been impossible.

Whenever magic was necessary, Eleris was always there to assist me.

But now, that role could be taken over by Harriet, and if not Harriet, then anyone else.

"As you know, I originally spent a long time in a place unrelated to Darkland."

"……"

"So, it's just a return for me."

Indeed, there was no real need for Eleris to continue staying by my side.

"Plus, few know that I operated Akasha, but there's no good in having me, who did such a thing, by your side."

That too was correct.

After leaving Darkland, Eleris spent a long time in a place unrelated to it.

"So, may I go now?"

She was not originally a being of the demon world.

She probably never intended to get so deeply involved in Darkland's affairs.

She was merely passing through.

However, contrary to her intentions, she played a much larger role than expected, took on decisive tasks countless times, and had innumerable deep sins.

So, I could understand, to a degree, why Eleris, trying to leave for my sake, made that choice.

It wasn't a return.

She was probably trying to do something to deal with her guilt in some way.

So, she would seek another harshness that pushed her mercilessly.

She would attempt something no different from self-torment.

Just as Ellen had chosen to do.

"Eleris, you were driven into a corner."

“……Yes, I was."

Eleris, with a sorrowful expression, silently nodded her head.

"If you hadn't believed me when I said I didn't want war, and killed me then, none of this would have happened."

"…”

That's right.

If she had killed me then.

None of this would have happened.

"If you found my actions suspicious, couldn't trust me, and killed me, none of this would have happened."

"…”

Eleris had constantly doubted whether she could trust me.

But in the end, she couldn't lay a hand on me. I was the first to tell Eleris that I knew the future.

"And if you hadn't operated Akasha to save me, none of this would have happened."

"…”

Antirianus's proposal.

Sarkegaar's pressure.

Eleris had operated Akasha and caused the Gate incident.

She didn't want to lose me.

That's what Eleris had said.

Even if it meant swapping with the world, she didn't want to lose me.

She said she hated war.

She said she hated fighting and death.

In the end, during our time together, Eleris came to value me more than the world itself.

Just like that.

So much so.

We had an argument.

"So, despite all that, you want to be resolute in the end?"

"…"

At the words that were nearly a rant, Eleris silently bowed her head.

"No."

I shake my head.

"Don't go."

Eleris laboriously lifts her head to look at me.

Seeing my eyes, the whites of Eleris's eyes turn bright red.

It must be the same for me right now.

It was inevitable that Eleris, seeing me like this, would feel the same way.

"I guess I can do without you now. Who wouldn't know that?"

There were many who could replace Eleris.

There was Lucinil, there were other Vampire Lords, and there was Harriet.

"We've argued to this point."

"…"

In the end, Eleris sheds tears.

It was impossible to replace someone with someone else.

An empty place is an empty place.

"Who can replace the part Eleris occupies in my heart? No one can do that."

Someone could sit there, but while the void could be filled, the loss cannot.

"Don't go."

"…"

“I wish Eleris wouldn’t go, having pushed back until the very end, listening to the words telling her not to go.”

Loss is loss.

Roles could be replaced, but the place in the heart could not.

"I can't handle doing it twice when I don't have to do it in the first place."

It was not a criticism.

Because we argued and ended up like this.

We argued till the end.

I hope she doesn't leave at these words.

Upon hearing those cruel words, Eleris rose from her seat.

"Alright. I understand……."

Then, she gently embraced me.

"I won't leave. I'm sorry. I… I've hurt you more, haven't I…"

As if she thought she had caused harm, Eleris held me in a comforting embrace for a long time.

The cold body temperature of a vampire.

Although cold, it was always warm.

Just as it was now, as it had always been.

This was what made me who I am now.

Without this, I wouldn't have been able to start at all.

It may not have been a happy ending, nor a pleasant journey.

But we arrived together in the end.

Thus, I didn't want to be torn apart without reason.

We've come this far.

I want to go beyond this point with you.

Maybe my grip, tightly holding onto her, pleading her not to leave, conveyed this message.

Eleris, trembling, spoke carefully.

"Even if I'm here, not much will change…"

"If my absence hurts you…"

"If it hurts that much…"

"Alright…"

"To watch over you forever in this immortal life, as a final act……."

Wasn't it said that Vampire Lords had their own desires?

"Let's conclude it that way."

Eleris seemed to have decided when to put an end to the countless, long days of her existence.

"I'll be with you forever."

With an arm wrapped around Eleris, I thanked her for promising to be with me until the end.

"Thank you, Eleris."

For that promise to be with me at the end, just as she had been there at the beginning, I was simply grateful.

The scale of the wedding, suitable for the one who was to become the ruler of the new continent, was by no means grand.

It wasn't a public wedding.

Not only was it due to the circumstances, but it was also an impossible luxury for humanity on the brink of collapse.

Therefore, only the leaders of humanity from all over the world, and the influential people, were invited to the wedding.

The truth about the marriage and the proclamation of the new empire were to be announced to the empire.

Although modest due to the circumstances, everyone understood and accepted the situation.

Still, the number of invitees was not small.

Not only the leaders of each army belonging to the coalition, but also the surviving kings and nobles from various regions attended.

It was nothing compared to the golden age of the empire. If compared to that time, the current situation was more like a modest banquet in the imperial palace.

And, of course, the attendees were filled with more fear and anxiety than anticipation.

Should we trust this empire?

Can humanity truly be rebuilt?

Is it right that the reconstruction is left in the hands of the Demon King?

The sensitive ones already knew.

Those who were thinking of rebelling against the new empire did not come.

Naturally, among those who attended, there were those who harbored thoughts of rebellion and attended with the intent to probe.

In such an unsettling atmosphere where music was flowing nonetheless.

The one holding the baton was Ranian Sesor, who always comforted everyone with music in the coalition forces.

During the war and even after it.

Music was needed.

The band followed the conductor and played cheerful music, while people mingled.

Of course, it wasn't just nobles and royals present here.

—---

"Scarlett."

"Ah, Evia."

Of course, Scarlett, with her red hair, was quite noticeable among the attendees.

"The dress suits you well. Where did you get it?"

"Well… Charlotte gave it to me. She said I might need it."

Scarlett blushed at the seemingly envious gaze of Evia.

Telepathic ability user, Evia.

She was also one of the hidden heroes of this war.

Evia's telepathic ability greatly accelerated the speed of command transmission in the headquarters.

It wasn't just those who fought who were heroes.

Among those who didn't fight, there were countless heroes.

Those who came from the temple were numerous, all deserving of the title of war hero.

The musician Ranian Sesor.

Telepath Evia.

Adelia, who was quietly dining next to the Archduke and his sons.

And the countless others who could no longer be here.

All those who died in the war were worthy of the title of hero.

Evia quietly pointed to Ranian Sesor, the conductor of the orchestra, and spoke to Scarlett.

"It seems Ranian will become a bard."

"A bard…?"

"Yes."

Ranian Sesor's contributions were also considerable.

He could sit in the court orchestra of the palace, and there would be plenty of wealthy people still willing to employ Ranian.

However, to become a wandering bard across the continent.

Especially at this time.

"He said he'll sing about what he saw and heard in the allied forces. Whether that's a good or bad thing, I don't know. But he seems to want to tell the truth."

How hard the fight was.

How tragic it was.

Yet how heroic it was.

Upon hearing that Ranian would wander the world singing such songs, Scarlet nodded.

"I still don't know. My ability… it seems to have lost its meaning now."

Speeding up communication.

While it was a highly necessary ability in the army, now that the allied forces had disbanded, Evia didn't know what she should do.

With the war over, the responsibility for survival now fell on individuals.

The Empire was not wealthy enough to provide eternal rest and meals to the war heroes.

The command from the new Emperor, to live and eat well, was a harsh one.

It was a way of saying, you've done enough, now take care of yourself.

Perhaps in the future something could be given to the veterans of the war, but right now it was difficult.

Everyone was starving.

Therefore, Evia, uncertain about her immediate future, had a somewhat gloomy expression even while attending the Emperor's wedding.

"Scarlett, have you thought about what you'll do?"

"Um…"

Scarlett bit her lip slightly at Evia's question.

"I think I might become a knight."

"A knight? You're skilled, Scarlett. That seems natural. As a knight, would you stay here?"

Evia pointed to the ballroom floor, namely, the palace.

"Yes, I might… I might become one of His Majesty the Emperor's bodyguards."

"Really?"

Evia could only open her mouth in surprise.

There were those who had faced the Demon King directly, but among their peers, there were also those who feared the Demon King vaguely, like Evia.

Especially those who had not been close even during the days when he lived under the name of Reinhardt.

Scarlett was to become the Emperor's bodyguard.

"Charlotte… she said that my power is strong in protection… she asked how I would feel about being in that position…"

"That was Charlotte's suggestion," said Scarlett.

In the case of a supernatural like Scarlett, her power was used in a unique way, often for destruction and neutralization.

However, her strength was, in fact, originally specialized in protection.

With a knight capable of neutralizing all magic and superpowers by his side, the Emperor's safety would be ensured in any situation.

"Of course… I think I'll likely end up in a more pitiful situation, requiring protection more often…"

Regardless of her superpowers, Scarlett was convinced that she would rarely need to protect the Demon King, who was incomparably stronger than she was.

She even had a grim prediction: in case of an emergency, she feared that the Demon King might risk his life to protect his own knight.

She was almost certain of this grim future.

Thus, as Scarlett and Evia watched the wedding banquet, the room was filled with countless guests.

The Duke of Saint Owan and his family, having dinner at one side of the room, were among them.

—---

"It's… hard to describe this feeling in words."

"I see."

They were watching their beloved youngest daughter's wedding.

But it was a joint wedding.

The Demon King was marrying five brides, and their youngest daughter was one of them.

Adelia, who was dining with them, still couldn't quite believe that Harriet had ended up in this unusual situation.

They had recently met and talked for a long time, but it still felt surreal.

The Duchess was sobbing silently, and the Duke couldn't bring himself to reprimand her.

Their confusion was inevitable.

And in one corner of the table, Heinrich von Schwarz sat with a vacant expression, his mouth agape.

Around him, including Erich, Cayer, Kono Lint, and Cliffman, were seated, wearing expressions identical to Heinrich's.

They were all in a state of shock.

"What is this? Shouldn't we be celebrating? Your mo… no, your sister would be very happy if she saw you like this."

"Shut up, Liana…"

"Huh! Huh!"

Cliffman, usually a reserved man, had to forcibly shut Liana's mouth.

Everyone, including Heinrich and his friends, was too shocked to accept this astonishing situation.

Soon.

The wedding ceremony began.

All the attendees stood up.

The Demon King and his brides were instantly in their places.

Centered around the Demon King.

In the closest spot, on his right, stood Harriet de Saint Owan.

There were no complex and lengthy procedures, no long wedding speeches, no moments spent discussing the new Emperor's vision for his new empire.

Louise von Schwarz, Harriet de Saint Owan, the Demon King, Charlotte de Gardias, Olivia Lanze, and Airi.

Each dressed in a dazzling dress, they stood side by side as the Demon King, positioned between the five, quietly opened his mouth.

"Those who know me, know that I hate long speeches."

"Surely no one's come this far without knowing who's marrying whom? So, I'll skip the explanations."

"We're getting married."

"Also, today is not only our wedding day but also the day we declare a new empire."

"From this moment, we declare the new empire."

"We've announced the wedding and the declaration of the empire, so we've done everything we need to do."

"In these times of poverty, it would be shameless to linger and chatter."

"Thank you for making the time."

"Obviously, not just for me, but for all of you who are busy."

"I don't want to keep you for too long."

"So, eat moderately, get moderately drunk, and leave when it's appropriate."

"Now I hate anything that drags on."

"The war and rebellion were too long."

"So now, let's keep everything short."

"Let's proceed swiftly and wrap this up."

Everyone was stunned by his radical speech.

There was no formality.

It was rude.

There were no procedures.

It was chaotic.

This was the new empire?

They were getting married.

It was a new empire.

In just a few sentences, everything was over.

Could this be the behavior of the new Emperor, the new ruler of the continent?

Was this kind of rule really correct?

Regardless of what everyone else thought, the new rule had begun.

What could they do?

The man who called himself Emperor had decided so.

CHAPTER 683

Epilogue - The Red Thread

There were words that can only be written in blood.

There were pictures that can only be drawn in blood.

Such was the empire of the Demon King.

After the Gate incident, the Demon King proclaimed a new empire.

There were those who believed in the Demon King, and those who did not.

Thus, division arose.

The division scattered, and each seed began to sprout.

There were several wars.

The seeds of division did not disappear, but were scattered somewhere once again.

What was important was that the Demon King's empire never lost a single time.

If asked whether there was no prosperity or reconstruction, that was not the case.

Even as division and conflict continued, the world was recovering its civilization.

Thus, sometimes staggering, but eventually moving forward in the flow of history, the fifth year of the new imperial era arrived.

-Desolation

In a forest that had become a sea of blood.

Ellen was surveying the scattered corpses.

She stared quietly at the pieces of monsters, neither human nor beast.

As if deep in thought.

As if trying to guess their original form.

Ellen took out a notebook and started writing.

She wrote, and although it was simple, she also drew.

She had no need to draw in her lifetime, but Ellen had grown accustomed to even this.

But why did she need to draw?

Monsters sometimes mirrored each other, but ultimately, each looked different. Many had appearances that could only be described as bizarre, grotesque, and unfamiliar.

Recording each individual monster by drawing them was, in truth, a meaningless task during the Gate incident.

Despite that, Ellen did it.

Ellen, who had spent a while in the blood-stinking forest, closed her notebook, put it in her backpack, and walked somewhere.

The sun was setting.

Ellen knew that the night of the forest and the mountain was approaching unusually fast.

-Tap, thump

The night had fallen, and Ellen sat in front of a bonfire.

The fire drove away the beasts and sometimes drove away the monsters.

But in truth, that didn't mean much either.

Just as there were monsters that feared fire, there were monsters that were fascinated by fire.

The fire at night might be dangerous because of its light, but in reality, there were monsters whose vision was not dependent on light.

Therefore, having a bonfire at night in a no-man's-land could be dangerous or not.

It could be meaningless, or it could have meaning.

So, the conclusion was simple.

Since a bonfire has the clear advantage of warding off the cold, it's better to keep it lit.

That was one of the insights Ellen had gained during her long wandering life.

In the end, staying alert and falling asleep was all the effort she could make.

Living a life of killing monsters in the no-man's-land.

Ellen could kill the monsters but couldn't exterminate them.

The days when monsters poured out of warp gates were over.

But that didn't mean there hadn't been dangerous days over the past five years.

Many monsters had dangerous attack methods, and these were sometimes fatal to Ellen.

She was more often lost after the Gate incident.

It was hard to say it was just because of the monsters.

There were more times when she was lost because she was starving, or she ate something wrong.

So now, Ellen realized that she had a body that wouldn't die even if she ate

something fairly toxic.

Of course, even so, she never once did something as foolish as roasting and eating the meat of an unknown monster.

Ellen pulled out a notebook from her backpack.

Naturally, it wasn't just one but several.

She flipped through the pages under the light of the campfire.

She pondered over some pages for quite a while, while she dismissed others as meaningless.

Occasionally, she would add annotations to the contents she recalled.

Could it be called a journal?

Ellen had been writing this since a certain point in time.

She had a strong intuition that it was something she needed to do.

Hence, she occasionally visited places where people lived, to acquire notebooks and pens.

Of course, due to her rugged lifestyle, the edges of the notebook had become frayed.

After checking the notebooks for a while, Ellen neatly packed them back into her backpack.

"Phew…"

Ellen pulled out some kind of root from her bosom and chewed on it thoroughly.

She had no idea what it was.

She simply ate it because she knew it wouldn't harm her.

Somehow, Ellen had come to know a good deal about things she didn't even realize could be eaten.

She couldn't even remember the last time she had a proper sleep.

She didn't know when she last had a proper meal.

Minimal food, minimal sleep, minimal water.

She was surviving with just that.

There were times when she got lost for days when she ran out of all her food upon entering a place where she couldn't find any.

It wasn't a fight against monsters, but a fight against hunger.

If she hadn't been surprisingly robust, any ordinary person would have died of starvation long ago.

What about going back to where people lived and taking a few days off?

Even though she was completely disconnected from civilization, Ellen occasionally visited towns or cities where people lived.

Obviously, she had to conceal her identity.

Her food supply was running low, that was true.

But for now, there was a task that needed to be done.

And even if she were to return, there was no real solution.

First and foremost, the most critical problem.

She had no money.

Living in the uninhabited wilderness was primarily about killing monsters.

So, there was absolutely no room for making money.

She knew well that if she spent enough time in human cities, there were countless ways to earn money, but that in itself was risky.

Ex-emperor Bertus de Gardias and the hero, Ellen Artorius, were the empire's most wanted. Whether willingly or not, the emperor had no choice but to designate the hero and the ex-emperor as the empire's greatest enemies.

Regardless of the emperor's will, those who supported the emperor despised the runaway ex-emperor and Ellen Artorius.

So, she could not afford to do anything while staying in human cities for more than a brief visit.

Even anti-imperial forces were no different.

These were places that would certainly try to apprehend Ellen for various reasons.

In some places to arrest him, in others to plead for the salvation of humanity.

No matter where she went, Ellen was in a precarious position.

Of course, there was no issue of her identity being exposed by just passing through. As long as she reasonably hid her identity and appearance, she just couldn't stay for long.

Although she couldn't always observe, Ellen occasionally saw signs of civilization gradually reviving.

The adventurers' guild that Ellen once briefly experienced still existed.

But instead of exploring the vast darklands as before, it had shifted to a form similar to mercenary work: slaying monsters and getting paid for it.

It was a fact that security was unstable everywhere, and there couldn't possibly be enough forces to clean up the entire continent.

Therefore, individuals undertook the task of killing monsters and received compensation from the empire.

That was the current changed form of the adventurers' guild.

If Ellen had been paid for killing monsters, she might have been buried in money. No, one should first doubt whether the empire even had the ability to pay her that much

money.

However, living in the wilderness to avoid the empire's eye, it would be absurd if she suddenly registered as a new adventurer because she needed money.

Since her face was too well-known, it was impossible to create a false identity.

So, while there were ways to earn money, they involved taking great risks.

In truly desperate times, she had disguised herself as an anonymous adventurer, brought in heaps of proof of monster extermination, and collected money.

Given the nature of the adventurers' guild that paid for monster extermination, they had no choice but to give money if there was an overwhelming amount of proof of monster kills.

Of course, when she did that, the guild would be in an uproar, wondering who that person was.

She had often fled with the money before the commotion grew too large, and it was genuinely dangerous.

In the end, wandering through the wilderness was a perilous and harsh ordeal.

Returning to human habitation was just as dangerous, if not more so, as wandering in the wilderness.

There were still villages friendly to wanderers, who didn't care about the Demon King or the empire.

In such places, she sometimes received a little food and a place to sleep in return for helping with minor tasks.

Leaving aside what Ellen looked like, there were people who didn't know who Ellen Artorius was. Places cut off from the world still existed, after all.

Having finished chewing the root she had been gnawing on, Ellen leaned back against the tree stump, drained, and looked up at the sky.

In her days at the Temple, she had food aplenty.

She could survive on so little now, she wondered if it hadn't been wasteful to eat so much back then.

"…"

Finding her thoughts amusing, Ellen faintly smiled.

There was someone who used to chide her for eating so much, yet always cooked for her when she expressed a desire to eat something.

With her head bowed, Ellen took a moment to catch her breath.

She found it hard to stave off the intrusive thoughts about the life she had abandoned of her own accord.

What if she had stayed?

But her present reality told her otherwise.

Bounty hunters lurked around every corner, hoping to capture Ellen and Bertus, while on the other side, there were still those who hailed Ellen as a hero, praying she would one day save humanity.

Her mere existence was the spark of war.

Even in her absence, wars had erupted several times. Had she remained, larger wars might have ensued.

The empire might have crumbled even before it could be fully established.

There should only be one sun.

The existence of two suns would set the world aflame.

And in truth, the past held no meaning.

Her status as a wanted person held no meaning either.

Reality existed regardless.

The Demon King was married.

And a lot of time had passed.

"…"

She had never entertained the thought of interfering with that.

She couldn't reclaim the time that had flowed on since her departure, clutching at fragments of past memories.

Their story would have filled up and overflowed by now.

She was merely imagining.

What if everything had been fine?

She was merely reminiscing.

Back then, she should have eaten more.

The food that Reinhardt had made for her.

The moments when they could touch each other.

That time.

A bit more.

Even a little bit more.

"…"

Finally breaking off her thoughts forcefully, Ellen closed her eyes.

The wind was cold.

The next day.

Ellen rose from her spot by the dying fire she had kindled, and slung her backpack over her shoulder.

The confusion of the night faded with the morning.

In a situation where there were things to be done, distractions did not find her.

The creeping sadness and self-ridicule always found her just before sleep.

She did what needed to be done, as she always had.

She had decided to kill monsters in the wilderness.

Unable to live in any place where civilization existed due to her condition, she roamed only where it did not.

It was hard and painful, but it was a path she had chosen for herself.

So Ellen walked through the forest.

Reaching the signs she had found last night was not difficult.

Ellen had learned to do things she had never known how to do before.

Not only drawing pictures but also tracking.

The shape and position of broken branches.

Footprints.

Excrement.

Signs of predation.

All these allowed her to estimate things like the size of the absent monsters, their range of movement, and their location.

If Ellen had been an adventurer, she might have been the most outstanding adventurer of her time.

Ellen had been doing this job since before the Adventurer's Guild changed its policy to reward monster hunting.

Sometimes, Ellen found it amusing.

Her older brother, Ragan Artorius, had been a legendary adventurer.

He had become famous as a legendary adventurer, then a hero.

But the sequence was different for Ellen.

She was first known as a hero, then became an adventurer.

Ellen examined the traces, gauging which direction the missed group had headed.

She checked the faintly pressed bushes and footprints, then consulted her notebook.

The contents of the notebook matched.

And so she walked, tracing the remnants.

The traces sometimes disappeared, but once she had the overall direction, they could be found.

There were times when she would just mindlessly kill monsters.

Wherever she went in the continent, monsters were there, so she just had to kill, kill, and kill.

Because then, someday, she would be able to hunt the final monster.

She saved people from monsters.

That goal, at least, she could accomplish.

But the process was not easy, and eradicating each hidden monster was an extremely difficult task.

Therefore, the number of monsters would gradually decrease and become harder to find.

That's why Ellen gradually realized how to track the monsters.

Overall, it wasn't much different from hunting.

But it was just hunting with a different prey each time.

For giant monsters, they were easy to spot from afar.

Regardless of size, however, every monster was lethal. So, if she saw a giant monster, she would rush in and kill it, and certainly deal with smaller and medium-sized monsters too.

She would find and kill hidden monsters.

In those days, for the past few months.

Ellen had been feeling a constricting fear.

Despite the extreme shortage of food, she was prioritizing searching for monsters over finding food.

That's why she was pulling out her notebook more often than usual.

Ellen moved cautiously, but quickly.

Passing by footprints and broken branches.

Footprints.

Footprints that matched the drawings in her notebook.

She followed them.

Monsters usually looked different from each other.

There were even many monsters that could not be recognized as living creatures.

Of course, there were similar ones.

Those with wings, or giant monsters.

There were many similar ones.

But it was very rare for them to match perfectly.

Not that there weren't any, but the colors, or the horns, were slightly different.

But a few months ago.

Ellen had come face-to-face with monsters that had identical forms.

Of course, they weren't strong monsters. They all fell scattering blood, double-sided by her lament.

But at that moment, Ellen had dry heaved in fear.

Since then, Ellen has been continually searching.

Comparing the traces, wandering and scouring the vicinity.

Looking for something.

Hoping that it didn't exist.

Hoping it was just a delusion.

Drawing, collecting traces, searching.

Searching and searching again.

Hoping it was just one of those occasional things.

Hoping there were monsters of that form too.

How much time had passed?

When she had been wandering the forest for over five hours.

From a crack in a certain hill.

-Grrrr!

Ellen heard the low, gruff cry of a monster.

"……”

-Srrrr!

Pulling out her Lament, Ellen kept her eyes on the cave.

The monster was silently glaring at Ellen with its red eyes from the crack in the hill.

A threat.

A threat that meant it would kill if she approached.

But Ellen did not retreat.

She slowly approached the monster.

-Grr!

As Ellen approached, the monster extended its clawed front paw out of the crevice.

The warnings and threats grew more intense.

Yet, Ellen advanced further, her eyes wide open.

Please, no.

Please, let it not be.

She hoped.

And with another step forward.

"Rawwwwr!"

The creature that lunged at Ellen, its massive mouth lined with hundreds of teeth, charged at her.

"Swish!"

The monster, charging at her, was sliced in half from mouth to tail by a stroke of the Void Sword, its momentum burying it deep into the forest.

Instant death.

The monster was exactly the same as the ones she had been chasing.

It wasn't the first time she had killed such a beast.

She had slain this type of monster countless times.

And yet, she kept encountering the same kind of creatures.

She had no interest in the slain monster.

Ellen had not been chasing it.

She had been searching for this monster, but it wasn't truly what Ellen was after.

Why had it threatened her?

Monsters typically exhibit indiscriminate aggression towards everything except their own kind.

But just a while ago, it had been growling, hidden in its cave.

As if warning her to stay away.

Ellen cautiously approached the cave from which the monster had emerged.

It couldn't be.

It must be a delusion.

Such a thing shouldn't exist.

With these thoughts, she had roamed this area for months.

Obsessively.

Because there were monsters that replicated by dividing and multiplying.

She kept telling herself that it must be something like that.

But even before entering the cave, Ellen had already sunk into despair.

"Squeak."

"Squeal."

From inside, faint whimpering sounds could be heard.

“Ah…”

Entering the cave, Ellen was left speechless.

Six or so little things, each about the size of a grown man's arm.

Something that looked like miniature versions of the monster she had just killed, squirming around, their eyes barely open.

“Ah, ah… ah…”

Thump.

Ellen sank to her knees before their feeble wriggling.

Something she had never encountered in any other creature.

Ellen had found the monster, but the monster wasn't her true target.

She had been searching for the monster's offspring.

The offspring were, in and of themselves, evidence of reproduction.

Not duplication or division, but the most ordinary form of reproduction.

The existence of multiple monsters with exactly the same form suggested this possibility.

Monsters that reproduce had appeared.

Whether they were originally present or emerged as an adaptation, she couldn't tell.

Therefore, there must be other creatures among them that reproduce.

Of course, there could even be monsters that crossbreed with entirely different species.

She had left this as a mere possibility as she had never seen such a case with her own eyes.

If one was possible, there was no reason why two would not be.

Not only this species in front of her, but other species could also be capable of reproduction.

She didn't know when this had started.

But one thing was certain: the number of monsters wasn't decreasing, it was still increasing.

Somewhere in the world.

They weren't just appearing from gates, they were increasing through reproduction.

This implied only one thing.

The monsters would never disappear from the world.

The moment of killing the last monster would never come.

“No…”

Ellen could see nothing but despair.

CHAPTER 684

"Are you ready?"

"Of course."

At his nonchalant reply, Charlotte looked at Reinhardt with a warm expression.

"When I ask if you're ready, it means something entirely different from your understanding. Are you ready?"

"Didn't I say I am?"

He was still incorrigible.

His outfit had been checked, his demeanor posed no problem.

All he had to do was proceed as planned.

But as always, the problem was something beyond his outfit.

After inspecting the emperor's attire one last time, Charlotte placed her hands on both his hips.

"Do you remember the reprimanding we got because of how you handled our wedding?"

“…Ah, yeah, I remember."

He had wanted to proceed quickly, in his own way, but he had still been scratched at for mishandling their wedding, which was already a contentious event.

Especially when the topic of the wedding came up, Harriet would still be on the brink of causing a scene.

"If you don't want another such incident, do it right."

"I understand…”

"I agree with your usual theory that speeches don't need to be long, but they don't need to be rubbish either. Your speeches, they're undoubtedly rubbish."

"I'll do it well…”

"You always say you will, but never do."

"I'll really do it well this time…”

"I've heard that before, you know?"

Despite the reprimanding, he would still babble nonsense in front of people.

The emperor's habit of incurring great debts with a single word hadn't changed.

“…Then, can't you do it?"

"What?"

"Ah, of course, I should do it! Yeah!"

The emperor quickly shook his head, sensing imminent danger from her gaze alone.

Until the end of the preparations, or more accurately, until the moment it was about to begin, the emperor continued to be berated.

After enduring such hardships,

-Creak-

The door of the waiting room opened, and a knight with red hair entered.

"Your Majesty, it is time."

"Ah, yes."

The emperor's knight, Scarlett, took the lead, and the emperor followed behind.

As if to watch how he would handle it, Charlotte's scrutinizing gaze trailed after him.

In the vast square of the Temple, countless people stood with tense expressions.

The first thing the Empire did was reopen the Temple.

Due to the drastic decrease in the human population, it wasn't as grand as before, but a staggering number of new students had enrolled in the Temple.

While it didn't offer as many benefits as before, the tuition was no longer astronomically high.

The Temple was operational.

That alone was enough.

Since the Empire no longer belonged to the Gardias Royal Family, the Temple was no longer called the Gardias Temple.

The emperor did not bother to prefix the Temple with any other adjectives, stating that the Temple should just be called the Temple.

And so,

The elementary division was its own, as were the middle and high school divisions.

Moreover, it wasn't just humans now.

Though they were few, there were definitely demons as well.

Some demons resembled humans closely, while others had somewhat unfamiliar forms.

Any sentient being capable of receiving education and understanding could enroll in the Temple.

It had been a while since demons began to mix into the Imperial Capital, so the spectacle wasn't exclusive to the Temple.

However, naturally, not everyone felt comfortable with this sight.

Despite this,

In the square filled with freshmen of various races, everyone was focused on one spot.

The place where the Emperor would appear.

With the blast of a colossal horn, a tune signaling the Emperor's entrance began to play.

The voice of the royal mage, who was serving as the master of ceremonies, echoed throughout the hall.

Some revered him.

Some feared him.

Some hated him.

"Presently…"

"The representative of the gods."

"The ruler of the Divine Empire."

"The conqueror of the Gardias Empire."

"The founder of the Council of Mage."

"The protector of the Human Autonomous Territory."

"And at the same time, the one who ended the Gate crisis."

"The Archdemon."

"Thus…"

"The ruler of all demons."

"The legitimate ruler of all mankind."

"And also the savior of the world."

"The Apostle of the God of War."

"The Invincible."

"The Immortal."

"The Demon King of Flames."

"Emperor Reinhardt makes his entrance."

Emperor Reinhardt.

That was the name of the emperor.

The Continental Emperor revealed himself before the people.

There were no flashy robes or crowns.

The emperor, dressed in simple attire, stood on the platform, looking down at the excited crowd. Behind him, Scarlett, the Emperor's knight escort, stood at attention.

The speech for the Temple freshmen was an annual event.

Every time he stood on this stage, the Emperor encountered various meaningful glances.

There was hatred.

Admiration.

Awe.

And fear.

This signified that the Emperor had not yet united the continent, let alone humanity.

"Hmm…”

The Emperor's voice echoed across the square.

"Um… I've been doing this every year."

"Probably, um, Gardias Te… no, I shouldn't say Gardias anymore. Yes, just Temple."

"When we reopened the Temple and accepted the first batch of freshmen, I had to make a speech."

"I can't make long speeches."

"So, back then, I said only one thing."

"Devote yourselves to study."

"That was it."

"But then, um… I regretted it a lot…”

As the Emperor looked somewhere, subtly checking the atmosphere, he cleared his throat a few times. Then, he looked at the faces of the people.

Some people were taken aback by the Emperor's tone.

"So, since then, I've been trying to squeeze out a little more. But I guess it doesn't suit me well, it never works."

"Me, um, that… the long prefix that comes before my name… it makes me uncomfortable."

"It's unnecessarily long."

"It feels shameful to brag about myself."

"But then, well, apparently, that's part of being an Emperor."

"You all need to know what I've been doing so far, what kind of being I am, and it's not a lie."

"Ruler of all demons, right."

"Ruler of all mankind, yes, that's true."

"The owner of the Divine Empire, this is also true."

"Since I still possess two divine relics, I am also a representative of the gods."

"So, even though it's a bit embarrassing to recite it like that, it's true, right?"

"Why should I feel ashamed of telling the truth? After I thought about it like that, I stopped feeling ashamed."

"Yes… Those prefixes like 'invincible', 'immortal' that come before my name, they all have a reason."

"It's a long explanation of how great I am."

"You all should know how great the being that welcomes you. That's what it means."

"I'm listing the reasons for my greatness."

"Indeed, there might be children here who wouldn't understand what this means."

"Young ones might not yet comprehend terms like 'Council of Mage' and such, right?"

"So, let me simplify it for the children."

"I am, extremely grand."

"You are currently facing the grandest and most dignified being in the world."

"Hence, you should feel very honored."

At these words, the atmosphere in the hall paused momentarily.

Even if he was the Emperor, that was a bit much.

They understood, of course.

But to say such things himself?

Whether the Emperor was great or not, the fact he spoke such words…

It was quite off-putting.

In that atmosphere, the Emperor looked at the silent crowd and spoke.

"What are you doing, you lot?"

"You should be clapping."

At that command-like statement, everyone started clapping as if forced mechanically.

"Clap, clap, clap, clap, clap!"

Everyone clapped, wondering what this was all about, their expressions increasingly perplexed.

"Have you seen it?"

However, the mischief that had been on the Emperor's face vanished amidst the clapping.

"Greatness is like this."

"Among you, some despise me."

"Some among you probably hate me."

"There might be those among you who would like to stab me in the back."

"But when I say clap, you all have to clap."

"No matter what feelings you harbor towards me."

"You cannot defy me."

"Just like the remnants of mankind who opposed me had to kneel before me, living miserably within the Autonomous Territory I established, surviving on the scraps I

give them."

"Even though they still hate me, they have to bow their heads to my feet, like the representatives of the Autonomous Territory begging for my help."

"You cannot defy me."

"Those who have opposed me have either died or became beasts begging for food."

"That is why I am great."

How did hate, resentment, and anger matter?

They clapped when told to clap.

They would kneel when told to kneel.

Domination is complete with just that.

Having loyalty is good, but it's sufficient to have obedience.

The Emperor knew that now.

However, this speech didn't fit this place at all.

Even though it was true.

So, what was he getting at?

This wasn't a speech to be given after conquering mankind, it was merely a temple initiation.

Bragging about his greatness at a temple initiation was bragging in the wrong place.

"However, there is one way to be greater than I, the grand, noble, and absolute Emperor."

"The one who rebuilt the fallen demon realm, conquered mankind, ended the Gate crisis, accomplished the impossible feat of rebuilding civilization."

"There's one thing that even this great Demon King, who achieved these monumental tasks, hasn't done."

Everyone was puzzled when he suddenly mentioned something he hadn't done after bragging about all he had accomplished.

"Graduation."

"I still haven't graduated from the Temple."

Everyone was taken aback by the sudden nonsensical statement.

The Demon King couldn't have attended the Temple in the first place.

All students at the time would say the same since its operation was entirely halted.

But in the end, the fact was the fact.

The Demon King didn't graduate from the Temple.

And with the Temple reopening, there were quite a few among those who had served in the Allied Forces who attended the newly operational Temple and graduated.

Among the classmates of the Demon King and the students from the Temple in those days, there were those who had returned to graduate.

In any case, the fact that the Demon King did not graduate was as true as the modifier that came before his name.

"Soon, you will be able to do what I could not."

"At least, I can live a life that is just one step better than this great Demon King."

"I can say that there's at least one thing I'm better at than the Demon King."

"How grateful is that?"

"I stand before a life where I can confidently say that I graduated from the Temple, something even the Demon King couldn't do."

"I can live a life where I can say that the Demon King is a fool who couldn't even graduate from the Temple!"

"So, study hard."

"Graduate safely."

"End of speech."

Everyone was staring blankly at the fading figure of the Demon King, who was also the emperor of the empire.

There was no applause or cheers for the departing Demon King.

Everyone was taken aback.

Regardless of how they thought about the Demon King, one thought was stuck in everyone's head.

Reinhardt the Great was a very strange individual, a thought engraved in everyone's mind.

"I told you not to do that!"

"No, but this time it was longer!"

"Did I tell you not to make it short? I told you not to make it like a dog! Today was the worst, no, not the worst, but the second worst! The second!"

"Is it really that bad? I didn't do well…"

"Aaahhhhh!"

Charlotte's hysterical voice could be heard from the waiting room, as Scarlett stood at the door listening.

It was a familiar scene to Scarlett, who had been with the emperor longer than the empresses.

Of course, since it was not an ordinary day but an event, there were several imperial guards with the emperor.

As the captain of the royal knights and the emperor's personal guard, all of them were Scarlett's subordinates.

One of them asked,

"Captain, what if there was a script?"

Wouldn't it be better to have a script rather than having Charlotte fret like this?

“…If there is a script, he won't read it."

Scarlett's habit of being ‘respectful’ to everyone was still the same.

The Emperor had tried to correct that habit several times, but it never changed.

"More precisely, he can't read it."

"He can't read it?"

Of course, the emperor was not illiterate.

"If there is a script, he will read it like… 'My beloved people… '"

"Ah."

"Surprisingly, he gets very nervous."

He didn't seem nervous at all.

But the fact was that he was so nervous he couldn't read the script properly, and his speech would become nonsensical.

So, Charlotte had been trying to fix that strange chronic problem for five years, but after failing every time, she would scold him after everything was over.

"Why are you like this? Should we just die? Should we die together?"

"Why are you so angry about not doing well?"

"You haven't improved at all! You're not growing!"

"At this age, growth is a disease…!"

"You can't even keep a single word?"

The other imperial guards listened to the emperor's voice from behind the door as well.

No one was surprised since it was a common occurrence.

Scarlett spoke with a faint smile.

"Still, isn't an emperor who can't give a speech better than an emperor who loses?"

At her words, everyone made ambiguous expressions and nodded their heads.

Undefeated.

Invulnerable.

Immortal.

Those titles had been earned since the day he single-handedly suppressed an army advancing for rebellion.

The emperor had never been defeated.

He didn't even need an army.

After the proclamation of the new empire, there had been several wars.

These wars were inevitable, breaking out after all attempts at dialogue and compromise had failed.

The emperor took only Scarlett with him to every battlefield.

No one else was allowed to join.

Scarlett, too, didn't participate in the fighting; she was instructed to wait on the other side of the battlefield.

"Must you really go alone?"

The emperor stood alone against the advancing enemy army.

"I must instill fear in those who don't obey."

"They need to know that I can't be killed."

"If they understand that even I, alone, cannot be killed, they won't be able to raise their flags against me or the empire anymore."

"Then there won't be any more incidents like this in the future."

"Is it presumptuous to be certain that there won't be?"

"At least, the number of such incidents should decrease."

In order to subdue those who refused to accept his rule with terror,

The emperor set out alone.

And the emperor's enemies learned why he was known as the Apostle of the War God.

CHAPTER 685

Even if he wanted to listen to nagging all day, the Emperor had no time for it.

After finishing his entrance speech, the Emperor returned to the imperial palace.

Charlotte was by his side as he sat on the imperial throne.

The heated ministers began their respective reports.

"Your Majesty, I bring news that the warp gate in the Autonomous Human Territory has been destroyed."

“…Again?"

The Emperor, seemingly fed up with the repetition, closed his eyes and pressed his temples with both hands.

"What do they want to achieve by destroying the warp gate, which is the lifeline of our aid? Are they asking us to transport supplies by carriage? Could it be that they want to starve to death?"

"It wasn't the autonomous government that destroyed the gate, but as always…”

"The citizens, right?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The gate incident had come to an end.

However, warp gate phobia was widespread across the entire continent. People believed that warp gates were massive ticking time bombs.

It was only natural for people to feel vague fear and anxiety about the reintroduction of something that had nearly driven humanity to extinction.

As a result, not only in the Autonomous Territory but also across the entire

continent, warp gates were frequently destroyed by terrified citizens. Thus, it was not an issue unique to the Autonomous Territory.

Nevertheless, the benefits of the warp gates were not something people could give up out of fear. So, compared to the previous era, the area surrounding the warp gates was under strong military protection.

"Although we continue to proclaim that the gates are unrelated to those of the previous era, many people still refuse to believe it… In particular, citizens of the Autonomous Territory view the warp gates as entrances to invasion and feel uneasy."

Especially in the Autonomous Human Territory, which could be considered a gathering place for the anti-demon king forces that rejected his rule, warp gate phobia was bound to be more severe.

"Did we cover the cost of repairing the warp gate after the last destruction?"

"Yes, we did."

"Really? They must have thought they could get away with being lax since we rebuilt it for free. It's time to change their mindset."

The Emperor began to speak with a cold tone.

"From now on, the Autonomous Territory government will bear the full cost of repairing the warp gates. That way, they'll protect them with their lives. Deliver this message to the Autonomous Territory government."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

There were many humans in the Autonomous Territory.

Those who had rejected the demon king's rule and the followers of the Hero Religion.

Instead of killing them, the demon king had allowed them to live together in one place.

As a result, rebellions occurred from time to time, but they were all ultimately suppressed.

Furthermore, they could not survive without the aid of the new empire.

Although it was a gathering place for those who hated the demon king, the reality of the Autonomous Territory was that they couldn't even survive without him.

This was Charlotte's plan.

The Emperor issued orders while receiving various reports.

Occasionally, he would listen to advice from Charlotte, who was standing beside him.

Although the tasks at hand weren't very different from what he had been doing in Edina, the scope he had to manage was vastly larger, and the number of lives involved was on an entirely different scale.

With a bored expression, the Emperor maintained his focus as he made one decision after another.

There were important matters to discuss, but there were also trivial ones that seemed hardly worth mentioning.

However, there were undoubtedly topics that, although insignificant, had to be reported to the Emperor.

"Your Majesty, we have caught the person who damaged your statue installed in the Aligar district last Monday. He is a 67-year-old man living nearby and is currently in the custody of the guards."

“…Why did he do that?"

"The reason is not important, Your Majesty. Damaging a statue modeled after you is a challenge to the imperial authority in itself. I believe he should be sentenced to death."

"And on Monday? I don't remember well, how did he damage it?"

The official reporting to the emperor looked pale in response to the question.

The emperor heard so many things in a day that too many of them disappeared from his memory.

"Um, he… he urinated on it…"

"Urinated? Ah… yes. I think I heard about that."

"Yes…"

Hm.

The emperor crossed his arms.

The emperor may have forgotten, but his officials remembered the shocking incident.

An attitude of not understanding why he should be angry about it.

He had reacted like this at the time.

"I never ordered the installation of that statue in the first place."

The demon king seemed to be searching his memory, lost in thought for a moment.

"I don't know who it was, but some sculptor said he wanted to dedicate it to me and made it…"

"It's Ernak."

As the demon king's assistant Charlotte whispered the name, the demon king nodded as if he remembered.

"That's right, it was that fellow Ernak who carved it as a tribute to me or something. Aren't all the statues and images of me like that?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Why is it a challenge to the imperial authority when a citizen damages an object they sculpted without my permission?"

In fact, such things existed throughout the empire.

In some form or another.

Artists and groups praising the demon king created various works of art idolizing him.

"It is because a statue bearing your likeness symbolizes the emperor's authority."

"Shouldn't we stop people from making statues of the great and dignified emperor at their own discretion? That could also be seen as a challenge to imperial authority…"

Charlotte interrupted the emperor before he could finish suggesting that if problems arise from unauthorized work, they should not allow it in the first place.

"If we start censoring in that way, we'll end up prohibiting even the poets from singing praises of Your Majesty's achievements, creating a needless atmosphere of fear. Undoubtedly, inevitably, you will find that situation more tiring later on."

"Is… is that so?"

"Forbidding idolization in fear of idolization, Your Majesty, is in itself a very powerful form of idolization. And if you issue a ban and later find it more troublesome, leading to its repeal, the citizens will only feel unnecessary confusion. Inevitably, people will think that the imperial family lacks consistency."

"I see. Well, let's just forget about it…"

If left alone, people would idolize the emperor as they pleased, arguing whether it was right or wrong.

If told not to, an endless list of things to prohibit would only create a meaningless atmosphere of fear, fueling resentment.

In the end, repealing the ban itself would mark the climax of the emperor's pointless meddling.

So, leaving it alone was the best solution.

"Anyway, just let the old man off with a warning. He must have been drinking. When people get drunk, they sometimes do unpleasant things in places they shouldn't."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The minister sighed and nodded, knowing that the Emperor rarely punished anyone in such cases.

"At least give a warning. Tell them if they pull that stunt again, they'll have to fight in front of the Emperor himself. I'm curious if they can manage that."

The old man was released along with the Emperor's bizarre warning.

After that, many reports came in.

When the Emperor's judgment seemed to verge on mistake, Charlotte would quietly discuss with him and make decisions.

Everyone knew Charlotte was the true power behind the new royal family.

The reason she was respected even as a remnant of the Gardias royal family was because everyone knew she never acted against the Emperor's will or ordered others to do so.

And soon, the ever-present topic arose.

"Your Majesty, there have been sightings of a hero in the Olland region of the western Kernstadt area."

The atmosphere in the royal chamber, which had been quiet, became heavy.

In the royal chamber, and throughout the empire, there were two extremely sensitive subjects.

One was the hero, Ellen Artorius.

"Also, there have been sightings of the deposed Emperor Bertus in the Olland region about two months ago."

The other, of course, was the topic of Bertus de Gardias, the previous emperor.

"When we look at these two matters together, it seems that the deposed emperor and the hero are once again acting together…"

"Can you take responsibility for that?"

"…"

"Can you take responsibility for that statement?"

The minister who reported the matter lowered his head even further before the Emperor's cold gaze.

"Every time we've heard about the hero and the deposed emperor, we've dispatched forces. But as far as I remember, not once has the information been true."

Most of the sightings of these high-priority fugitives were false.

No one knew whether any of the reports had been genuine.

Regardless, all pursuits had ended in failure.

The Emperor stared at the reporter as another sighting was reported.

"Your Majesty, I am merely reporting the information that has come in."

"Isn't it your 'opinion,' not information, to 'infer' that the deposed emperor and the hero are together based on two sightings?"

"That… that is…"

"How much longer must the empire's power be wasted on false sightings, most of which have proven to be lies? Some of the people who provided the information didn't even know the appearances of the hero or the emperor. There have even been instances where sightings were reported simultaneously at the southernmost and northernmost ends of the continent."

However, it was not the reporter who answered, but someone else.

"Your Majesty, the deposed emperor and the hero are the greatest threats to the current empire. The moment they reach the autonomous region, humanity will rally again, and those within the empire who harbor impurities will be tempted. We must closely monitor even the smallest piece of information regarding those two individuals."

The other officials did not hesitate to agree, as if acknowledging the truth in those

words.

It was true that the people in the autonomous region were essentially slaves and that their resentment remained.

If the wars so far had been the resistance of those who could not overcome their anger, a real war could break out the moment the vanished emperor and hero reappeared.

Those who remained in the empire, hating the Demon King, might also follow that turning point.

Thus, the deposed emperor and the hero were real threats to the empire.

There were still those who believed that the two were hiding somewhere, plotting in secret to save humanity from the Demon King's oppression, and the believers of the hero in the autonomous region continued to have faith.

Thus, for those who pledged loyalty to the Emperor, the only way to eliminate the root cause of the empire's unrest was to find and kill the hero and the deposed emperor.

Everything they said was for the sake of the empire's eternity and peace.

There might have been incorrect information in their words, but there was no reason to doubt their loyalty.

That's why a tremendous bounty was placed on the heads of Ellen and the deposed emperor, and the Emperor could not deny its legitimacy.

In order to justify the rule of the Demon King, the hero and the deposed emperor had to be captured, and the propaganda continued.

Now, they revered the Demon King as the savior of the world, and hated the hero and the deposed emperor.

In reality, civilization had achieved some level of reconstruction, the absolute problem of hunger was almost resolved, and people were expanding their foundation of life by restoring the ruined cities and buildings.

It was not an era of peace, but it was approaching that time.

Most people believed in reality and substance.

Many people's lives had improved after the rule of the Demon King.

So people believed in the Demon King.

However, ironically, no matter who held power after the end of the Gate Incident, things could only improve. The Demon King just happened to be the one holding the reins.

It was a situation where things had to improve, and it was unknown whether things got better because the Demon King took power or not.

However, things were improving, and in fact, the Demon King did not commit unnecessary atrocities against those who accepted his rule quietly.

Not all policies went smoothly, but there were obviously no senseless acts of tyranny or slaughter.

Nowhere on the continent were people gathered and burned to death. The Demon King was actually taken aback by the fact that so many people had been terrified imagining such a thing.

Moreover, he even created autonomous regions for humans who refused his rule and claimed to be their protector. Of course, everyone knew that the title of protector was just a name and in reality, he was a watcher.

In the end, unlike the early days of his rule, a considerable number of humans now supported the Demon King due to improved living conditions.

Thus, they naturally came to hate the hero and the fugitive deposed emperor, who were on the opposite side. It was a natural phenomenon.

So it was an unavoidable reality that the entire continent was pursuing the two, even if the Emperor did not.

However, the Emperor still felt uneasy, even though he understood this.

"Yes, that's true. But not all the information is false. How long do we have to listen to stories from murderers who kill innocent people and then demand money, claiming they killed the deposed emperor or the hero?"

Every time such a story came up in a report, the Emperor felt suffocated.

"Your Majesty, just because some accidents happen, we cannot stop the attempts to find the deposed emperor and the hero. They might have hidden in the autonomous regions."

"We should strengthen the surveillance of the autonomous regions, enforce curfews, and of course, prohibit gatherings to prevent people from assembling, and reinforce the guards more than they are now."

"Your Majesty, the cunning humans of the autonomous regions are merely taking advantage of your compassion."

"Not only should we identify the ungrateful and reckless people who have received your forgiveness many times but do not know gratitude, but also the fact that the leaders of the past rebellion are included in the top echelons of the autonomous regions is a very serious security risk."

"The problem is not just the autonomous regions. We need to significantly increase the activities of the intelligence agency to identify the subversive elements within the empire as well."

"Yes, Your Majesty. There are countless subversive elements who have deliberately chosen not to be affiliated with the autonomous regions in order to operate within the empire."

Once someone opened the floodgates, words poured out from all over, and the Emperor silently looked down at his ministers.

The Emperor glanced at Charlotte, who was standing quietly by his side.

'Please save me.'

That was the underlying meaning of his gaze.

Looking down at the Emperor, Charlotte gave a faint smile and nodded her head

quietly.

"From now on, I will receive the political reports."

In the end, Charlotte took over.

"Let's leave out the useless conversations and start by organizing the reports according to each department."

As always, this was the flow of events.

They were all individuals loyal to the Demon King.

There was no doubt about their loyalty.

It was just that their expressions were aggressive.

Their loyalty was so strong that they didn't hesitate to say that they should kill the deposed emperor's half-sibling, Charlotte, right in front of him.

Some of them were even former members of the empire.

This was because they were either irreplaceable personnel who had not been replaced even after five years or had proven their loyalty to the point of not being replaced.

That's why Charlotte, although doubting their intelligence, did not doubt their loyalty.

CHAPTER 686

The Emperor exited the meeting hall and walked down the corridors of the central palace. The major matters had been dealt with, so Charlotte would handle the remaining affairs of state.

Once they exchanged summaries and discussed matters, the bulk of the day's work would be completed.

As always, Scarlett was by the Emperor's side.

In fact, Scarlett had spent more time with him than anyone else.

"Is only the evening event left?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. As I mentioned earlier, the banquet of the meritorious will be held in the Spring Palace tonight."

"I see…"

"It's been a while since all five empresses gathered together."

"…Indeed."

The Emperor had five wives, and their ranks were equal.

All five were empresses.

Although there were concerns that this could cause confusion within the ranks, the Emperor had decided to proceed in this way.

Of course, among the five empresses, their influence varied individually.

The most influential was, naturally, Charlotte, who handled the overall state affairs.

However, that did not mean the other empresses were without influence.

Airi controlled and ruled the demon forces that had become a massive pillar of the empire.

Louise, as one would expect, ruled over Kernstadt, the second-largest power after the Empire.

The current King was Heinrich von Schwarz, but until King Heinrich became accustomed to state affairs, Louise was virtually the King, assisting him.

Kernstadt had a larger territory than the direct territories of the Empire. Even Edina Archipelago, which had been the base after the incident with the Demon King's gate, had already become part of Kernstadt.

The empire couldn't attempt much restoration or expansion due to the excessively dense population in the imperial capital.

The Empire focused on reducing the size of the imperial capital, which had become almost like a deformed city-state due to its immense size, and relocating its people.

And there was more.

"The Holy Empress has already entered the palace."

"Ah… Is that so?"

Olivia Lanze, who had completely reformed the Five Great Religions into a new group and became the ruler of another vast empire, also held tremendous power.

Of course, there were those who had become too famous for their power.

A person who had never existed in history: the most powerful mage.

An unparalleled entity capable of using infinite magic.

Harriet de Saint Owan.

For her, a new title had to be created.

A different position for a being of different stature.

The current leader of the Council of Magic, the highest decision-making and intervention body for all things magic.

"The Archmage was also heading there."

Harriet had become synonymous with that title.

—---

Since everyone was to gather at the banquet in the evening, the Emperor headed to the Spring Palace in advance.

The banquet had not started yet, but the preparations were bustling.

The Spring Palace, where Charlotte once resided as a princess, was still blooming with flowers.

Charlotte, who often had state affairs to deal with, had moved her residence to the Autumn Palace, where the institutions handling state affairs were concentrated.

In the courtyard of the Spring Palace now stood two people.

Holy Empress Olivia, her platinum hair braided up, and Adriana, with her black hair, standing next to her.

"It's been a while, Your Majesty."

"Greetings, Your Majesty."

Adriana, standing next to Olivia, was now the Holy Empress's knight.

Looking at the Emperor who had come to visit, Olivia Lanze, her mouth covered, wore a gentle smile that belied any trace of her once venomous demeanor.

If anyone had changed the most since getting married, it was undoubtedly Olivia.

Despite her declaration of being a thorn in the emperor's side, her demeanor had softened considerably after marriage, as if she had finally found contentment.

The reason was simple.

Empress Olivia was incredibly busy due to the establishment of the Holy Empire.

Consequently, she rarely had the chance to see the emperor.

And so, whenever she did meet him after a long absence, she found it a waste of precious time to quarrel and bicker.

Since their time together was so scarce, she cherished every moment, speaking only sweet words and behaving kindly.

"When did you arrive?"

"Just now. Not long ago."

She even responded to the emperor's inquiries with the utmost respect.

It was surprising how much a person could change.

To be precise, she had regained the demeanor and speech pattern reminiscent of the time when she was known as the Saintess.

For that reason, those who knew Olivia felt a sense of unease at this new behavior.

'It's like… I've confirmed that she's fundamentally a very good person, but I kind of hate to admit it. Where's the fun in that?'

That was how Charlotte evaluated the gentler Olivia.

Of course, there were many days after the wedding when she cried her eyes out, lamenting that she couldn't see Reinhardt as often as she used to.

"Why don't you stay a few days while you're here?"

"I would like to, but I'm too busy. The same goes for you."

“…That's unfortunate."

Olivia was beaming as if she couldn't ask for anything more.

“Oh, Reinhardt is here too.”

Everyone turned their heads at the sound of a voice from afar.

Approaching them was the Archmage Harriet, dressed in casual attire, as if she had just arrived at the palace.

Olivia's expression hardened.

"Doesn't that person ever take a hint? Always showing up at the worst possible time. Or does she do it on purpose?"

Of course, many things had changed about her, but her intense dislike for Harriet remained unchanged.

"What is it?"

The approaching Harriet looked at Olivia with a cold gaze.

"What about you?"

"When you see someone after a long time, shouldn't you at least pretend to be pleased?"

"And shouldn't you have the decency to disappear when I'm having a rare chat with His Majesty?"

"I haven't seen him in a long time either."

"Well, it's been longer for me."

Knowing that he would be the first to bear the brunt if he stepped into their quarrel.

"…"

The emperor could only break out in a cold sweat, remaining silent.

—---

Harriet had a minor spat with Olivia but claimed to be tired and entered the spring palace ahead of everyone else.

Despite her words, she knew Olivia didn't have much time and was showing consideration.

Given that Olivia had to establish a new nation, her responsibilities, in some ways, were even greater than the emperor's.

She even had to undertake the dangerous task of religious reform, which was bound to provoke intense backlash. Her days were filled with risk and busyness.

"How have you been these days?"

At the emperor's question, Olivia sighed.

"As always. There's still a long way to go."

Due to the nature of religion, the territory of the Holy Empire wasn't limited to the empire's land.

The temples, monasteries, and shrines of the Holy Order all over the world could all be considered part of its territory.

She had to govern over areas and people that were scattered across the entire continent.

The existence of the Demon God was, in fact, a fallacy.

It had taken an incredibly long time to convince people of this single truth, and even so, the majority remained unconvinced.

It was difficult to upend common sense.

"However, these days we have Demon Priests, making things a bit easier than before."

The Demon God was the deity of the demon race.

If the divine beings truly rejected the demon race, there shouldn't be anyone amongst them capable of wielding divine power.

However, recently, the presence of Demon Priests has caused people's perceptions to

change when they see demons wielding divine power.

"From the start, it seems right to just believe, considering that I possess Tiamata, but absolute numbers could be important too."

"That's true. Numbers are quite significant."

Having somewhat finished his conversation with Olivia, the emperor shifted his gaze to her side.

The Holy Empress's guardian knight, Adriana.

By the Empress's appointment, Adriana had become a knight to protect the Empress, much like Scarlett.

Adriana had initially refused, insisting she was not capable, but Olivia had practically forced her into the role.

And as the saying goes, the role makes the person. Given enough time, Adriana, already a formidable holy knight, had grown into a fitting guardian for the Holy Empress.

"You've come in a dress today. What's the occasion?"

"I was ordered to dress appropriately for the occasion…"

Adriana, with an uneasy expression, was clad in a dress more splendid than the Holy Empress Olivia's.

It was clear that Olivia had intentionally dressed her in such a manner.

Olivia covered her mouth and laughed at the sight of Adriana.

"Now that we've abolished the law forbidding priests and holy knights from marrying, there's no need to hide your charm, is there?"

"…"

From the moment the Holy Empress married, it was as if all old laws were discarded.

Of course, all Adriana did was fiddle with the uncomfortable hem of her dress, her face filled with discomfort.

The Holy Empire itself wasn't that large.

However, the areas under its jurisdiction included all the lands where people lived.

The Holy Religion was a deeply rooted religion and naturally existed wherever its followers were.

Therefore, the Holy Empire was not only a state but also the intelligence agency of the current empire, gathering information from across the continent.

This was not intentional; it was an inevitable phenomenon.

As such, the temples and shrines scattered across the continent inevitably became aware of everything that transpired on the continent.

"What about the autonomous region? I guess things are still okay there, considering there hasn't been any news."

Thus, even in the autonomous region where the official governance of the Demon King's Empire could not penetrate, there were churches of the Holy Religion.

Naturally, these were very small, but they couldn't not exist, as there were still people who believed in the divine beings, even in places where the Hero Religion was dominant.

"Hmm… According to Rowan, they seem to have lost all will to resist since the last war. But who knows? It wasn't too long ago that they rebelled, thinking they could overthrow us. However, I believe we'll be safe for at least five years."

The Commander of the Holy Knights, Rowan, had not been purged.

After the war, she returned to where she belonged.

The realm of shadows, where her existence rightfully belonged.

Her work had changed not to heresy interrogation, but to gathering intelligence.

She was the head of the imperial intelligence agency.

Her role was to collect scattered information across the continent to detect threats to the empire.

Especially, her main duty was to monitor the autonomous region.

Ironically, it was Louise who suggested this, the one who desired Rowan's purge. Rowan accepted the proposal gladly.

Saying that she couldn't stay in an overstepped position for long.

She didn't hesitate to return to the realm of shadows after completing her work, arguing that the work she was good at suited her talents better.

In the end, it turned out to be a better outcome when the former Holy Knight Commander, Eleion Bolton, returned to his position and declared his support for the Holy Empire.

Of course, the Order of the Holy Knights has now become a completely subordinate institution of the Holy Empire. If the Holy Knights originally gathered the power of the Five Great Religions, it was natural for the Holy Empire to be a collection of the Five Great Religious Orders.

"Slowly, one by one, they are arriving."

Olivia smiles as she sees two people approaching the spring palace.

The emperor springs up from his seat as if seared by fire.

Both Adriana and Olivia smile at the sight of the emperor.

"Adriana, isn't this picture always interesting to look at no matter who sees it?"

"Sh, shut up…"

"…Yes. I won't say anything."

Since a certain point in time, a man whose face looks like he's chewing on rotten feces every time he sees the emperor.

And a woman who always has a cold expression.

The two of them are walking towards the spring palace together.

Not only the frozen Emperor, but Olivia also rose from her seat.

The master of the empire is Emperor Reinhardt.

And the real power of the empire is Charlotte de Gardias.

However, there is someone else who is most respected in the royal family.

The regent of Kernstadt, Empress Louise.

Empress Louise was not very close to the emperor.

Those who knew, knew. But to those who did not, it was because of some unknown reason.

Those who did not know, only knew that Empress Louise was the person the Emperor found most difficult.

That was why ironically, the person who the emperor found most difficult and feared the most was the most respected in the royal family, creating a peculiar situation.

"Oh, you, you've arrived. Teacher."

The Emperor bent his waist to ninety degrees to greet her.

“…I still don't understand why I'm the teacher. You're so formal, Your Majesty."

Louise looked at the stuttering emperor and clicked her tongue briefly.

When standing in front of Louise, the Emperor became like a mouse in front of a cat.

So everyone thought that the dreadful Emperor Reinhardt was afraid of Empress Louise, and they were also afraid of Louise.

In reality, Louise von Schwarz was a swordmaster, a tremendous talent in reality, and she herself is a war hero. If someone was afraid of her, there was enough reason.

Of course, to those who knew the circumstances, it was just a ridiculous event.

Despite the change, the still jealous Olivia found Reinhardt's actions in front of Louise simply amusing.

“…I will go in first, sister."

The current king of Kernstadt, Heinrich von Schwarz, rushed into the spring palace as if he were fleeing.

After the proclamation of the empire, Olivia knew that Reinhardt and Heinrich had become a relationship that never meets in private.

Whenever they locked eyes in a formal setting, they'd avoid each other as if they had seen something they shouldn't have.

Just like now.

"Um, would you like some tea…?"

"I already had some on the way."

"Then, how about a meal…?"

"Isn't the banquet about to start soon? Why would I need to eat beforehand?"

"Oh, right. I wasn't thinking clearly…”

His flustered state, unable to do this or that, was akin to a puppy in desperate need of the bathroom.

Empress Louise often stayed in Kernstadt due to her duties there, but occasionally she would return to the imperial palace for a few months.

During such times, the emperor would be on edge, unable to sit or stand, living each day in anxiety. This was true even when Empress Louise wasn't in the same room.

From his perspective, he wanted to do well by her in any possible way, but from the outside, it was hard to tell if he was trying to be good to his wife.

"Your Majesty."

"Yes, um… Yes? Yes, ma'am."

"How many times have I told you to stop acting like an old undutiful son who's anxiously trying to make up for his neglect of his aged mother?"

That strangely detailed explanation accurately described the emperor's behavior towards Empress Louise.

It didn't look like he was trying to treat his wife well; it looked more like he was trying to please a parent.

The evidence was that he might forget the gifts he gave to his other wives, but he always remembered to send gifts and greetings to Louise.

"Well, I… I'm sorry."

In the end, the Emperor hung his head.

He wanted to treat her well, but he didn't know how, leaving him helpless.

"It seems like I've become not an empress but an empress dowager."

It wasn't just the Emperor.

Olivia also respected her to some extent, as did Charlotte.

And there was one more person who froze just as much as the Emperor.

Another empress who had first entered the palace but had rushed back out upon hearing of Louise's arrival.

"Oh, oh, oh, you're here, Louise?"

The Archmage.

Her stammering was on par with, if not worse than, the Emperor's.

"Yes, have you been well, Archmage?"

"Y-yes! Would you like some tea…?"

"I've already had some."

"How about a meal…?"

"Isn't there a banquet soon?"

"Oh, right. Right? I wasn't thinking clearly…”

She echoed the Emperor's exact words.

She too sent gifts and greetings every birthday and every season.

"Haah…”

Louise didn't have high expectations for the marriage, given it was something she had to do.

In fact, she had assumed there might be difficult times ahead.

She thought that, due to the lack of a strong foundation or a deep connection with the Emperor, she might be ignored or treated as lesser.

But this, this was an utterly absurd marriage life gone awry.

CHAPTER 687

Epilogue - The banquet of the meritorious

As it was a banquet to gather the meritorious contributors of the Gate Incident, the scale of the arriving attendees was quite considerable.

Numerous people had gathered, and naturally, the spring palace was bustling with activity.

As it was a gathering for those who had achieved significant accomplishments, influential figures from various regions were present, and even individuals who were not influential but had accomplished great feats were invited.

Since most of the people who formed the backbone of the empire were invited, the scale of the banquet was, of course, large, and all five empresses attended after the Emperor.

The last of the five empresses to arrive was Airi.

Her mere appearance caused the people to unknowingly fall silent.

The Succubus Queen.

She was of a bloodline of great demons that ranked among the highest even within the demon race.

As she belonged to the race of great demons among succubi, who were known as the enchanting demons, it was only natural that she attracted attention.

"You have arrived?"

"Yes."

Airi, who had ascended to the second floor where the Emperor was, nodded quietly.

The people, who were momentarily enchanted, eventually regrouped and engaged in

conversations or danced.

Among them, some covertly glanced at Airi.

Airi was originally a great demon who had married the Emperor as the representative of the demon race.

That's what she had thought.

In reality, Airi governed the demon race and was mainly in charge of finding the remaining demon groups in Darkland and integrating them into the empire.

Although Charlotte was also an Archdemon, she lacked the ability to manage the entire empire, leaving Airi to take on the task.

"Even after all this thinking, the fact that you're the most supported empress among others… isn't it strange?"

Airi responded to the Emperor's words with an ambiguous smile, "You never know how the world works."

Airi, who had been given the nickname "Demon Empress," had the highest recognition among humans.

The Archmage.

The last princess of the Gardias Royal Family.

The regent of Kernstadt.

The ruler of the Holy Empire.

Each of them played a significant role, but Airi was the only demon.

Humans supported Airi for one simple reason.

The most beautiful empress.

It was simply engraved in people's minds that she was a great demon of enchantment.

The change in people's perception of demons due to just that one aspect was so significant that it was impossible to know how much it would have cost to achieve the same effect through propaganda.

When Charlotte realized that such a perception was spreading among people after the demon empress revealed herself to the public, she didn't just stand idly by.

As she had done in Edina.

She mobilized succubi to provide psychological counseling and used the empress as a figurehead for activities like relief work for the poor.

The only demon among the Emperor's empresses helped people from the lowest social strata.

Of course, not only Airi but also other succubi had been doing this for a long time in the Edina Archipelago, and they enjoyed doing it.

Ironically, unlike other empresses who had many responsibilities and struggled with external activities, Airi was the empress closest to the people of the Imperial Capital.

A large-scale civil project to improve the perception of demons.

There was no one more suitable for the job than Airi.

Thus, Airi was the most famous and most supported empress, being the only demon among the empresses.

There were even people who disliked the Emperor but supported only Empress Airi.

In the simplest and most certain way, Airi had captured the hearts of the people.

"Perhaps the Shadow Walkers will join us this time."

"Really?"

"Yeah, they're a somewhat gloomy race by nature. They're good at hiding, so they must have survived well. They prefer dark places and have keen ears. Don't worry, they don't practice cannibalism. They could work in the intelligence department. It won't matter if they live in the empire."

"Sounds good."

Of course, that didn't change the fact that she was the spokesperson and protector of the demon tribes.

While the majority were humans, ultimately, it was a place where demon races had to coexist as well.

Shelter had to be provided for the demon races who couldn't survive on human lands, and a foundation had to be created where only they could live.

The Emperor looked down at the banquet hall.

There were familiar faces and unfamiliar ones.

There were faces he hadn't seen in a long time.

They greeted each other warmly, as it had been a while since they had seen one another. The Emperor watched them quietly.

The Emperor then looked in the opposite direction.

It was not Airy but Scarlett, who was always by his side.

"Go down."

"Your Majesty? But I…”

In the banquet hall where everyone was wearing dresses or suits, Scarlett still wore her armor.

"Go on, you should greet Evia after such a long time."

It wouldn't do to refuse a warm welcome and greeting from a familiar face while she vowed to protect him here.

Scarlett hesitated before descending the stairs, as the Emperor quietly watched her.

The entire Spring Palace was virtually a banquet hall, with countless people eating and drinking everywhere.

Naturally, people gathered together in groups, and there were clusters of people all around the hall.

There were many private conversations, and the content of those conversations ranged from personal to public matters.

Among the stories buried in the flowing music, there were people who rejoiced in their long-awaited reunions.

However, there were also many cases where familiar people gathered in one place.

Harriet and Adelia, who had been apart for a while but now met frequently like they did in their temple days, were an example.

The two were mumbling together at a table in the banquet hall with papers spread out in front of them.

"If we make it according to this design, I'm not sure about the efficiency, but wouldn't it lack versatility? It would be nice if it could be used in ways other than harvesting."

"No, you can do it like this. There's a joint at the front here, so when you replace it, it looks like this."

"Okay, and then?"

"Then it can also act as a plow, and you can dig as much land as you want."

"Ah… I see. By simply replacing the parts, it can be used for multiple purposes, making it efficient. Since the core is the same, it should be easy to change its functions."

"Exactly."

Watching Adelia and Harriet discuss such matters in the banquet hall, Liana, who had emptied her champagne glass, put it down with a sound as if she had lost her appetite.

-Clank!

"Damn it, do you have to talk about that stench of compost here, ruining my appetite?"

"Huh?"

"What…?"

"Do I have to listen to you talking about making farming golems all the way here? You two might not know, but it's disgusting to me."

At Liana's words, Adelia and Harriet hastily tidied up the design drawings they had carelessly laid out on the table.

It all started when Adelia began to stutter, pulling out the blueprint she had casually mentioned earlier, as Harriet responded to the topic.

It was no wonder that Liana, who had dressed up in a long time with fancy earrings, necklaces, and a splendid dress, frowned upon the subject.

Cliffman snickered beside her.

“…Is it funny?"

"Sorry…”

Naturally, without any thought, Cliffman bowed his head under Liana's sharp gaze.

It couldn't be helped that Liana had an outburst when it came to farming.

Liana was the one in charge of the vast farming district of Saint Owan, which could be called the lifeline of the empire.

She oversaw everything from agriculture to livestock, forestry to fisheries, and even the processing that came after.

Liana de Grantz was responsible for all matters concerning food.

Her supernatural power, which had wielded absolute power in war, now bore the

responsibility of feeding the entire empire.

In a way, she had taken on a more important task than before the war.

The area under Liana's jurisdiction far exceeded the size of an average nation, as it produced food for the entire continent.

That was why a tremendous military force was stationed there, second only to the Emperor. And Liana was one of the few unique beings with the authority to summon the Archmage in an emergency.

Naturally, the Emperor was one of them, making Liana the only person other than the Emperor who could summon Harriet in an emergency.

Therefore, all discussions about food were extremely important to Liana, but at the same time, they were also an irritating topic that she didn't want to hear about anymore.

There was a reason why the empire's massive food warehouse was established in the Grand Duchy of Saint Owan.

And there was a reason why Adelia laid out the blueprint and Harriet showed interest in it.

"But once the automation golems are complete, not only will food production skyrocket, but we can also distribute them across the entire continent, reducing your burden. This is a good thing for you, right?"

That was what Harriet said, and Adelia nodded in agreement.

The technology used to create golems for war was now being transformed into technology for production.

They made automated machines for agriculture.

In fact, a large number of golems were being deployed in agricultural projects, and they were now dreaming of full automation.

Thanks to the golem technology of Saint Owan Duchy and Adelia's cooperation, the knowledge used to create Titans was now being partially used in agriculture and

even mining.

Of course, everyone knew the uncomfortable possibility that if the production line were to be slightly altered, agricultural golems could turn into terrifying war golems.

Depending on the components installed, they could be used for production or destruction.

In the end, Liana narrowed her eyes at the mention of it being something done for her convenience.

"Who said not to do it at all?"

Liana's beautifully painted nails trembled, her carefully drawn eyebrows furrowed, and she opened her red lips.

"Just not now."

"Do you guys know what I do normally?"

"Do you think I sit in a fancy salon, talking about whether it will rain, or snow, or stop?"

"I'm in overalls, rummaging through compost bins, staring at rain falling heavily all day in the places where it's needed."

"I'm asking farmers questions all day long, not knowing why the crops are lagging."

"I'm comforting and taking measures for depressed people, wondering whether wild boars have eaten the roots, monsters have ruined the crops, or pests have become rampant, huh?"

"That was me."

"After a very long time."

"I wore a dress, put on makeup, painted my nails. I fussed about it. Huh? I came all the way to the palace, huh? That's what happened."

"Do I have to hear that story today too?"

"Let's forget about that story for today, we can listen to it tomorrow…”

"You guys who are always locked up in the lab studying don't know me…”

"You guys who only like studying don't know me…”

"You guys who say it would be nice if we could just study, do you know my heart…?"

Adelia and Harriet really said such things.

They questioned why it was bad to be able to study. They didn't think of it as work in the first place.

"You guys don't know how much I want to play…”

Eventually, with eyes empty with despair, she muttered blankly.

"Well, we can talk about this later at the Council of Magic…”

Perhaps Adelia and Harriet sensed the mood, they looked at each other and nodded.

In the end, it was Cliffman who led Liana, the novice dancer, to the dance floor.

"Did you know he could dance?"

At Harriet's question, Adelia blankly stared at Cliffman and Liana dancing together.

"Doesn't he know by now? That kid, seeing his persistence, sometimes makes me dizzy."

The one who answered wasn't Adelia, but Cayer, who had approached from afar.

"Ah, Cayer."

Cayer wasn't alone.

There was a wheelchair Cayer was sitting in, and behind it, a woman who had pushed him forward.

"It's been a long time. Adelia, and Archmage."

"Hello, senior."

"It's been a long time."

Redina was behind Cayer.

Cayer Voiden had awoken from a coma about two years ago.

Redina had taken care of Cayer, who had fallen into a coma after the war.

Naturally, since they were both war heroes, priests would visit periodically to check on Cayer's condition, providing assistance in daily life as well.

But Redina was always by his side.

In fact, Redina didn't have to take care of Cayer to that extent.

However, Redina stayed by Cayer's side for all three years he was in a coma.

There was no way to know if Cayer would regain consciousness.

She looked after Cayer, whose heart was beating but nothing more.

And one day.

Cayer opened his eyes.

From then on, the two continued to be together.

She helped with his rehabilitation and they lived together.

If his rehabilitation went well in the future, he might regain his strength and be free from the wheelchair.

Redina always told Cayer that.

"Come on, eat this."

"Is alcohol… okay? It would be better if you didn't drink."

"What do you want to eat?"

"Do you want to take a walk for a bit?"

Harriet and Adelia quietly watched them.

While it was a miraculous thing that Cayer regained consciousness, and they both visited occasionally to see how Redina took care of Cayer.

And although it seemed like Cayer actually regained consciousness due to Redina's devotion touching the heavens.

There was no limit to her persistence.

"…"

"…"

If the persistent man was Cliffman, the persistent woman was Redina.

It was good that things were going well, but in the end, they thought there was no need for such persistence.

For a while, Redina fussed over Cayer, asking if he was uncomfortable or needed anything. When Cayer excused himself for a moment to chat with his friends, Redina finally caught her breath.

Redina smiled at Harriet.

"By the way, I've read the book you wrote, Archmage."

"Ah… that one…?"

"Yes, the 'Treatise of All Creation'. Only the introduction has been released so far, right?"

"Yes."

The magic that had turned Harriet into an Archmage.

After the war, Harriet had tried to organize her enlightenment into writing.

Redina was quick with magical calculations, but her overall magical power was insufficient.

If she could only grasp the magic Harriet had discovered, she might be able to solve her chronic problem.

So, she had tried to understand the book written by Harriet, even if it was just the introduction.

"I wonder if there's anyone who can understand it? I couldn't understand anything, not even a little bit."

It wasn't a book that any mage could easily access.

Like Adelia, Redina was also a member of the Council of Magic, which allowed her to read the introduction of Harriet's book.

"As expected… I see…"

"You don't need to be disappointed. In fact, I think you should write more."

"True. Honestly, I couldn't understand it either."

But there was a reason why they said Harriet could continue writing although they couldn't understand the content of her book at all.

Only the highest-ranking mages could even have a seat in the Council of Magic. When Harriet, the leader of the council, said she would organize her greatest enlightenment into writing, everyone in the council objected.

It was because the magic was too powerful, something that shouldn't spread easily.

So, Harriet had written only the introduction for now.

She then told the people of the Council of Magic to read it if they wanted.

However, Redina and Adelia couldn't understand it at all.

So far, similar answers had come from the other members of the Council of Magic.

Harriet explained the magic she had discovered and understood.

But the mages didn't know why it was possible.

There were those who couldn't understand how the magic itself functioned.

Even if they understood how the magic functioned, they questioned whether it was something humans could achieve.

The theory existed, and it worked.

But the simple conclusion was that there was only one person in the world, Harriet, who could activate it.

"So, you should write that magic book. After all, no one else can use the magic."

No one would understand it even if they tried.

However, for the sake of future generations, the great magic must be recorded.

So, leaving behind a magic book containing magic that no one of that era could understand would have great significance.

"Speaking of which, you're not just an Archmage for nothing, writing a magic book before even turning thirty."

It wasn't even a simple magic, but rather one that could rightfully be called the greatest in the world.

At Redina's teasing words, Harriet couldn't help but blush.

"By the way, I heard Adelia is getting married soon?"

"Ah, that… Yes."

Adelia was soon to be married to the third son of the Duke of Saint Owan.

Somewhere in the distance, the Duke of Saint Owan, who was also a member of the Council of Magic, was conversing with someone, and his three sons were also in attendance.

"So, we'll be family now?"

"Ah… that, I suppose…"

Seeing Adelia blush and lower her head, Harriet couldn't help but smile warmly.

CHAPTER 688

The banquet hall was filled with countless people, among whom most of the participants from the temple were included.

Those who were second-year students at the time of the Gate Incident were particularly remarkable.

Not only were there the Demon King, the Emperor and the two Empresses, but others as well, all of whom had distinguished majors and held significant positions.

"Evia, how is your studying going?"

At Scarlett's question, Evia nodded her head.

"Yes, lately I've been gaining some practical experience. It's not something completely new to me."

Evia, who was unsure about what to do after the war, ultimately chose the path that best utilized her abilities.

In the reopened temple, she was now majoring in military science.

Although she was not yet in charge of any practical work, it was already confirmed that she would join the imperial army upon graduating from the military academy.

And while it was still in the distant future, the Emperor planned to make Evia the commander-in-chief of the imperial army.

Her ability to communicate with everyone within her reach while seated would undoubtedly be more efficient when she was in command.

Naturally, under the full support of the royal family, Evia was given an environment where she could focus solely on her studies.

Scarlett and Evia surveyed the banquet hall together.

The second-year students at the time of the Gate Incident were all important people, but it was not possible for everyone to attend or even survive unscathed.

In particular, most of the B-class students were absent.

"Almost none of our classmates are here."

“…Yeah, that's right."

There were only three B-class alumni present.

Charlotte, Scarlett, and Evia.

Asher, number 4, was dead.

Delphin Izzard, number 9, was also dead.

Excluding Ranian Sesor, number 10, who had become a bard, all the others were missing.

Dettomorian, number 8, who had remained at the temple, was carrying out the Emperor's secret mission after the war.

Occasionally, they would hear stories about Ranian Sesor, who was confirmed to be alive along with Dettomorian. Excluding those five, everyone else was missing.

Ludwig.

Christina.

Louis Ancton.

Anna de Gerna.

Their deaths were almost a foregone conclusion.

Since they could not witness their deaths firsthand, going missing in battle meant death. Ludwig had gone missing on the battlefield, so from the moment the final battle ended, he was considered dead.

Trying to search for them would be futile.

Two were missing from Class A.

Bertus, the former Emperor.

And Ellen Artorius.

Both were missing and wanted at the same time.

"Where did they all go…?"

Scarlett recalled the faces of those who were now impossible to find amidst the lively atmosphere of the banquet.

Hoping that they were all alive somewhere, was it too dangerous a wish?

Was it a frivolous wish?

Evia, Scarlett, and Charlotte, who watched from afar, were all thinking about the people they could no longer find.

As the entire palace was the venue for the banquet, the groups were divided into several smaller gatherings.

Naturally, the temple alumni gathered together in small clusters.

Although they kept a slight distance from one another, they shared a bond as they had fought and won the war together.

Even the politicians and other officials who were not involved in the war could not easily enter the groups where temple personnel were mixed, even though they were not explicitly excluded.

Of course, they were relatively young, so it was difficult for them to join in the conversation, and the attendees from the temple were originally unrelated to political gains, so they were not particularly interested.

That didn't mean everyone there had nothing to do with politics.

Excluding the Emperor and empresses, the person with the most influence was undoubtedly King Heinrich von Schwarz of Kernstadt, who held the most actual power and political strength.

"…"

"Your eyes are going to fall out, kid."

"What's going to change if you keep looking at that?"

Naturally, the esteemed King of Kernstadt was being reprimanded by his friends for staring intently at something instead of focusing on the banquet.

He couldn't help but be scolded by Kono Lint and Erich, since he didn't eat or drink, just kept his mouth shut and stared at something, even though they had gathered after a long time.

However, in response to the scolding, Heinrich twisted his mouth and glared at his friends.

Heinrich's gaze was fixed on the Emperor.

The Emperor was now talking to Empress Louise, who had approached him.

The contrast between the Emperor's awkward appearance and the Empress's disdainful gaze was striking.

"Can't you stop looking?"

"Can't help it, can you?"

"Have you ever been in a situation like that?"

Heinrich's brow furrowed at the irresponsible answers from Lint and Erich.

Cayer, who had seen his expression, chuckled.

"I know it's not something you can achieve just because you want to, but sometimes I

think it's fortunate I wasn't born into royalty or the imperial family. Thanks to you."

Everyone realized that power sometimes brings about situations too difficult to handle with a normal mentality, as demonstrated by Heinrich's case.

It was something that had to be done, and it was necessary.

But it made everyone dizzy.

Kono Lint shook his head.

"Why are you so worried? He hasn't even held hands with her so far, has he?"

In fact, that was true.

The relationship between Empress Louise and the Emperor was extremely formal.

They treated each other like work because it was a marriage arranged for political purposes. Especially Louise.

That's why they should treat it like work, but Heinrich, hesitating, sighed.

"If it stays like this, you don't need to worry or be afraid of anything in the future, do you?"

As Erich said, regardless of what Heinrich thought, if there was only an official relationship between them and nothing else, he could just ignore it.

"I don't know… I just don't know…"

It had been five years.

A whole five years.

Heinrich's thoughts were somewhat different now compared to before.

Was it right for his mother to age like that her whole life?

He couldn't know for sure.

Naturally, as a Master Class, there was no significant difference in appearance between Louise and other empresses.

Occasionally, seeing himself severely discolored, Louise would say such words with a sad expression.

“…Don't worry about it, I won't have that happen in my lifetime. I wouldn't do something you hate."

Heinrich felt as if he had been struck on the head at her words. Naturally, Louise must have felt pressured by Heinrich's every action and attitude.

Unable to withstand such scrutiny, Louise had spoken those words herself.

He felt as if he was being cruel.

After that, Heinrich had no idea what to do.

"By the way, was it official that… Reinhardt was Heinrich's father…?"

"I'm not quite sure about that…”

"Enough, let's just drop it. Please."

Heinrich, who was the king of Kernstadt, was full of cold sweat on his forehead as he made the request.

Fortunately, the perfect timing to change the atmosphere arrived.

Cliffman, who had been dancing with Liana, seated her at Harriet's table and, after listening to some conversation, began to approach their table.

"It's been a while."

Everyone expressed their delight as Cliffman pulled up a chair and sat down.

Although they all belonged to the same empire, each had their own tasks to attend to.

So it was rare for all of them to gather in one place.

"How's everything going for all of you?"

At Cliffman's question, everyone nodded their heads modestly.

As the king of Kernstadt, Heinrich naturally resided in the capital of Kernstadt.

Erich de Lafaeri had become a knight and was now a member of the Holy Empire's Holy Knight Order.

Cliffman was in charge of guarding Liana, the empire's agricultural district supervisor, at all times.

The agricultural district was important, but above all, Liana de Grantz was an irreplaceable figure, so the overwhelmingly powerful Cliffman was assigned as her guard from among the empire's master-class warriors.

"Well, if you count rehabilitation as work, I'm doing that too."

Cayer, who was still in a wheelchair, laughed and nodded his head.

Naturally, Cayer relied on Redina's help to get by, as he couldn't leave the wheelchair yet.

"But I'm worried about what's next."

Even when his rehabilitation ended, there was no specific position prepared for Cayer. His talent for immense mana and his incompetence in magic manipulation remained unchanged.

If there were a war, he might have to use the Arc Crystal again, and at that time, he would have work to do, but it was better if that didn't happen.

At Cayer's words, Kono Lint shook his head as if he couldn't believe it.

"Hey, you can live your whole life without any problems just on your pension."

"That's true. But the same goes for you."

"Yeah, you're right."

Although very few received the highest level of pension based on their contributions, all of them had achieved such high accomplishments.

Of course, there were those who declined the pension based on their contributions.

"By the way, are they really going to give pensions to all the war veterans?"

Currently, only war heroes received pensions, but the long-term plan was to expand the pensions to all veterans.

The likelihood of this happening was quite low, though.

At Erich's words, Heinrich furrowed his brow with a cautious expression.

"Even if we can't give it right away, we plan to eventually. But it's still uncertain when it will be realized. We're also considering giving land as an alternative, but Reinhardt seems to be against that idea."

"Why would he oppose giving land? Isn't that better?"

"There's plenty of empty land out there. But if we just give any land as a fief, they'll have to do the pioneering work themselves, right? Is that fair? They don't even need any particular accomplishments to be granted land if they're willing to develop empty land. If we give them land and then say 'that's it,' resentment will only arise. It's even worse than not giving anything at all."

"Ah, I see."

Although they couldn't yet provide pensions to all veterans, there were certainly some who received them.

And gradually expanding the scope of those pensions was one of the empire's long-term tasks.

In the end, they each did significant work in their own right or held important positions.

"Have you heard anything new lately?"

Cliffman looked at Kono Lint.

"Not really?"

Kono Lint shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, it's best if you don't have much to say."

At that, everyone nodded their heads, except for Lint.

Kono Lint, of course, held his own place among them.

"It's quite fascinating how each of us is doing something, especially Heinrich becoming the king. To be honest, I find it more surprising that you're involved in such work."

"True."

"Yes."

"It is. How could that happen?"

At Cliffman's words, the others vigorously nodded their heads in agreement.

“…What's with you guys?"

Lint glared at them with an uneasy expression.

"Come on, someone like you being an executive in the Imperial Intelligence Agency? That's just unbelievable."

Kono Lint was one of the high-ranking officers in the current empire's intelligence agency.

"It was even more chilling that you pretended to be unemployed for three years."

He had even thoroughly concealed his involvement in such work from his friends.

Despite their subtle concerns about whether he should be doing something now, he had cheekily dodged the question, saying he would live off his pension as a lifelong unemployed person.

"This guy is sinister, isn't he?"

"I'm just a person whose professional ethics involve keeping secrets…! Sinister…!"

A man who surprisingly kept secrets well.

A man who was even thoroughly meticulous, to the point of being creepy.

The friends were most shocked by the truth that Kono Lint was not actually a ne'er-do-well.

Heinrich sipped champagne and snickered.

"But the way you were actually caught… was very you."

"What do you mean, 'like me'? What's so 'like me' about it?"

As Heinrich pressed the panic button, Kono Lint's face turned red, and he let out a suppressed yell.

Everyone else snickered, knowing the situation, and Kono Lint bit his lip in anger.

Kono Lint, who had hidden his affiliation with the Imperial Intelligence Agency from even his closest friends, was eventually exposed in a rather absurd way.

"My detective skills shined."

Kono Lint, who had been so thorough, was actually exposed as being a member of the Intelligence Agency by Erich, who had the least functional brain in the group.

This was how it went.

Erich occasionally visited the unemployed Kono Lint.

And then he saw it.

Kono Lint on a date with a charming woman from the Demon Realm.

Unable to intervene right away, Erich left in shock and later asked Kono Lint who the woman was, to which Kono Lint briefly replied.

His girlfriend.

Of course, Erich didn't believe that.

Erich sought Cliffman's advice about the urgent and unbelievable fact.

Was such a thing possible?

And he heard it from Liana, who was with them.

That it was probably the shape-shifting archdemon Dreadfiend, Sarkegaar.

And since Sarkegaar was part of the Intelligence Agency, wouldn't Kono Lint be a member as well?

So, they weren't on a date but discussing work.

In reality, Liana didn't have much connection with the Intelligence Agency either and didn't know much, but both Sarkegaar and Kono Lint were high-ranking officers of the Intelligence Agency.

The long-kept secret had been exposed all too easily.

"Of course, it could never be."

Though it wasn't exactly a deduction, Erich had unraveled Lint's secret through an absolute faith that such a thing could never happen to his friend.

"Why…? Why couldn't it be me…?"

"Why would an ordinary beauty be on a date with you?"

"It could happen…!"

"No. Unless it's a demon coworker, there's absolutely no way such a thing could happen."

Cayer shook his head, saying it wasn't in Lint's luck.

Infuriated, Lint quivered with resentment.

"Guys…! I'm telling you now, it wasn't about work back then…!"

Finally, Lint's words filled with frustration made everyone's expressions become strange.

"!!!!"

And then Lint, realizing what he had just said, froze.

"…?"

"Uh…"

"So, is that…?"

Amid the sudden silence,

"I don't understand… No, it's not."

"Ah, no. It, it was about work… Work."

Trying to recover, but it was too late.

Everyone had already heard too much and couldn't find anything to say.

"Um… Well, as long as you're happy, right? Uh, isn't that right? She's, she's not a bad person… No, not a bad demon, as I've heard… No, does that sound wrong…?"

Heinrich broke into a cold sweat as he spoke, and everyone nodded with a bewildered expression.

Erich mumbled blankly.

"This guy, since marrying a beauty is impossible, he's with a demon who could be any beauty…"

"No, it's not…!"

Just as Lint was about to vehemently deny it.

"Mr. Lint."

"…!"

Feeling a hand on his shoulder, Lint's eyes widened.

There, one of the maids in the banquet hall looked at him with a gentle smile.

Suddenly, one of the maids who had been quietly observing the banquet, filling glasses, and clearing plates reached out to a guest.

Doing such a thing out of the blue meant the maid in front of him had the qualifications to do so.

"If not, what isn't?"

Under her gaze, Lint froze with a pained expression, just short of biting his tongue.

And everyone else seated also froze.

They didn't know what was going on.

A situation where they couldn't understand what was going on but inadvertently found out.

"Again… were you… watching… me…?"

The reason Lint had been so strict about keeping his secret was not because he was sly and calculating.

It was because he couldn't tell when or where Sarkegaar, the demon, was watching.

"I told you, Mr. Lint…?"

The beautiful lips of the maid curved up into a smile.

"Always watching."

Whether it was affection, obsession, or surveillance to ensure he didn't say anything carelessly, no one could tell.

"You couldn't be careful with your words, so you'll have to be scolded again like last time, right…?"

"I'm, I'm, I'm sorry…"

But one thing was clear: Sarkegaar enjoyed Lint's reaction very much.

CHAPTER 689

"Please stop teasing him."

"But the reaction is too good, Your Majesty, I can't help myself."

Holding the champagne glass brought by the maid, the Emperor sighed deeply after taking a sip.

The Emperor was still laughing as he watched Kono Lint and his classmates shivering in the cold.

"I appreciate the amusement, but at this rate, he might start claiming that he has something embedded in his ear."

"Something embedded in his ear…? I don't understand…"

"Never mind, it's just one of those things."

The Emperor sometimes spoke in a way only he understood, and no one could figure out what he meant.

After the war, the captain of the newly formed intelligence unit was Rowan.

Rowan was appointed captain because there were many others more specialized in fieldwork than her. People like Sarkegaar and Kono Lint were more suited for field tasks.

That's why they were assigned based on their abilities, not just their merits.

Sarkegaar seemed to have a great interest in Kono Lint's behavior.

He often teased him, but it was evident that he cared for him a lot.

The Emperor quietly observed the banquet hall. Numerous people shared countless stories.

Without mingling, the Emperor calmly looked down upon the conversations and gatherings.

"You seem too young to be enjoying alcohol, young lady."

The Emperor quietly watched as a middle-aged gentleman approached a silver-haired girl.

The middle-aged gentleman tilted his head as he approached the girl, who was wearing a dazzling dress.

"Oh… what is that wine, as red as blood? I've never seen such a brilliant color before."

"It is blood."

"Pardon?"

"I said it's blood."

As the girl casually swirled her wine glass, the eerie red hue of the liquid confirmed her statement.

The girl revealed her chilling fangs as she moistened her lips with the red liquid.

"Uh, uh…!"

"Is this your first time seeing a vampire?"

"You don't mean… that's human blood, do you?"

"Of course. Want a taste?"

"No, no! I'm good, thank you!"

"Really? I could give you a little bite, you know. It might feel surprisingly nice."

"No, I'm fine! Excuse me!"

The Emperor chuckled as he watched the enchanting smile of the girl and the

middle-aged man fleeing in terror.

The woman with dark red hair approached the girl as she watched the man run away in astonishment.

"Lucinil! I always tell you not to scare people like that!"

"It's not my fault, he asked me first."

The Emperor quietly watched Eleris and Lucinil bickering.

Although many demons joined the empire, most of the vampires who had been with Edina from the beginning left.

Gallarush and Luvien led their clans and left the empire.

They were tired of the noise and decided to return to the quiet life with their people.

The only ones remaining were Eleris, the head of the Tuesday Clan, Lucinil, the head of the Wednesday Clan.

And the members of the Saturday Clan who were left behind due to the disappearance of their leader, Antirianus.

Eleris took them in and temporarily acted as their leader.

So, Eleris was not only the head of the Tuesday Clan but also responsible for the Saturday Clan members in her care.

Originally, the Vampire Lord clans did not try to expand their numbers, so there were very few vampires.

However, they all played significant roles in the early empire.

They even created an institution called the blood-purchasing organization for the legitimate existence of vampires.

What was absurd, though, was that there were cases where humans, who learned of the existence of Vampire Lords, were fascinated by the idea of a vampire that could withstand the sun.

There were often headaches due to those who outright asked to become vampires.

So it wasn't for the humans, but for the vampires that they created territories where they could live quietly, strictly prohibiting the entry of outsiders.

There were also those who outright knocked on the door, wanting immortality and eternity.

That was always a sweet proposition.

During the ongoing raucous banquet, the Emperor saw Empress Louise approaching.

"Your Majesty."

"Ah… yes."

"I have something important to discuss with you."

"What?"

Without even asking for the Emperor's opinion, Empress Louise grabbed his arm with a serious expression and started dragging him somewhere.

Heinrich von Schwarz, who witnessed this, stood there with his mouth agape, dumbfounded.

The place where the Emperor was led by Empress Louise was an empty guest room somewhere in the Spring Palace.

The Emperor's heart was pounding like mad.

Had the time come?

Was it finally happening like this?

But why today of all days?

Why now?

The Emperor was afraid of many things, but now he feared Louise more than anything else in the world.

A fear mixed with guilt.

That's why he froze whenever he met her.

"Ah, I'm prepared. Teacher, I just need a moment… just five minutes… five minutes please."

"…"

"No, it's not that I don't want to! Absolutely not! It's okay! Fine! Fine! But just for a moment…"

"Really!"

-Smack!

"Ouch…!"

In the end, Louise, who couldn't stand listening to his nonsense, dealt a tremendous blow to the Emperor's head.

Louise looked down at the Emperor, whose eyes were spinning with an icy gaze.

"Sit down."

"Yes."

At Louise's concise command, the Emperor immediately sat on the bed.

Her gaze became even colder.

"Not there, here."

What Louise pointed to wasn't the bed, but a chair.

Only then did the Emperor realize that the situation he had prepared for wasn't happening, and he clumsily got up and sat in the chair.

It was only natural that the Emperor's face turned beet red.

Only then, having regained some composure, did the Emperor notice that the Empress was not empty-handed, but holding something.

-Startled

Empress Louise took out the items one by one and set them down.

"What is this…? A book?"

What was in the case was books.

Or rather, it was more like notebooks.

A bundle of tattered and dirty notebooks.

It was placed in front of the Emperor.

"I think you need to see this."

Perplexed, the Emperor carefully opened the notebook as the Empress suggested.

The worn notebooks had frayed edges and were even torn in many places.

It wasn't torn on purpose, but rather, it showed traces of being torn accidentally.

"This is material sent from the Kernstadt Adventurer's Guild headquarters."

“…Is that so."

At first, the Emperor hesitantly opened the notebook, and then he looked puzzled.

Most of it contained drawings.

"Is this a drawing of a monster?"

"Yes, it seems so."

"Why would someone draw a monster?"

Perhaps there was someone who wanted to record the aesthetic form of monsters, as it did exist.

In a world with countless variations, it couldn't be said that such a person didn't exist.

Louise didn't answer, as if urging him to take a closer look.

The drawing wasn't particularly detailed, but it did have intricately drawn characteristic features.

It wasn't a very well-drawn picture, but it wasn't excessively crude either.

It was a picture drawn quickly and accurately, as if done in one stroke.

Each page not only had a drawing of a monster, but also faint writing at the bottom.

"[Kernstadt, northeastern border area near Aireden, hilly terrain]"

The Emperor glanced at the memo and frowned.

"The location of discovery… is it?"

What could be deduced from this:

This wasn't a product of imagination or something else; the monsters had been seen and drawn in person.

It was an era when money was given by the adventurer's guild for killing monsters.

"Isn't there a policy of paying for drawings instead of monster corpses?"

"It's not unheard of, but that's generally the case."

Although there were no exceptions, they didn't usually pay for drawings. Therefore, these couldn't be evidence drawn to receive payment.

And above all, there was too much content.

The Emperor decided to examine the notebook more carefully, rather than expressing doubt.

He didn't know whose it was, but he cautiously handled the old, worn, and dirty notebook, fearing possible damage.

There was a conviction that, regardless of their condition, these notebooks were extremely valuable.

As the Emperor turned the pages and checked other notebooks, his expression grew more serious.

Louise quietly observed the Emperor, who even reopened notebooks he had already seen.

"What is this?"

The depicted monsters weren't entirely identical.

However, strikingly similar monsters were found multiple times within the notebooks.

The locations were all different.

And they were discovered in places more than a thousand kilometers apart.

As the Emperor looked through the notebooks, he began to understand why the original owner had drawn these monsters.

As the final volume approached, the Emperor's expression grew increasingly grim.

Eventually, there were consecutive drawings of monsters that were identical in appearance.

The discovery locations were similar as well.

When the Emperor saw the last page of the notebooks, his eyes widened.

Small monsters were drawn.

And there were brief notes written.

The once neat handwriting was now quite distorted.

As if reflecting the trembling heart of the notebook's author.

"[Definite immature specimen.]"

"[Was under the protection of its mother.]"

"[Monsters are breeding.]"

"[Through this case, the possibility that the subspecies of monsters discovered so far are actually the same species, rather than just similar-looking specimens, has increased.]"

"[A significant number of monsters are likely to have already developed reproductive capabilities.]"

"[Among the monsters discovered so far, the number of species estimated to have reproductive capabilities is 24.]"

"[There are likely more.]"

For a while, the Emperor said nothing.

Louise, too, watched the Emperor's silence.

"We need to call everyone."

“…Yes."

At the Emperor's words, Louise nodded.

CHAPTER 690

The banquet had not been interrupted. After all, suspending the banquet wouldn't make the situation any better or solve the problem.

And nothing was certain yet.

They had merely gathered the people who needed to have a quiet discussion.

The conference room in the Spring Palace.

Scarlett was positioned at the entrance to prevent anyone from entering casually.

The five Empresses and the Emperor were all gathered in one place.

The Emperor had waited patiently for everyone to confirm the contents of the notebooks.

Their expressions and reactions were not much different from the Emperor's.

Some species of monsters were reproducing.

It was impossible to know which species, how many, or where they were multiplying.

The recovery rate of the entire continent was less than 30% of what it was in the previous era.

Thus, eradicating all monsters on the continent was impossible at that stage. They had been postponing that task until they had the resources.

However, if this was true, the age of monsters disappearing would never come.

Although the situation wasn't as dire as during the Gate incident, there would be a perpetual battle against the monsters.

There might be a day when they could eradicate the monsters completely, but that day was postponed to a distant future.

Dark clouds settled over the faces of those who realized this fact.

"We can't say it's too late. From the beginning, searching the entire continent to kill all the monsters was an impossible task," Charlotte said.

She was right.

This was just another disaster that occurred after the initial catastrophe, and there was no way to prepare for it.

The fledgling Empire, struggling even to stand, couldn't possibly take to the sky.

They had prayed that such a thing wouldn't happen, but in the end, it had.

It was something everyone knew, even if Charlotte didn't say it.

They had done their best, but there were things beyond their best efforts.

"It seems that the monsters have established themselves as a species in the ecosystem of the continent. We can't predict how the changes they cause will affect all of us. We should be more afraid of the unpredictable events that will occur as the ecosystem changes, not just the monsters attacking humans," Charlotte continued.

Changes that occurred when a new species appeared in a stable ecosystem.

The appearance of monsters had already caused widespread devastation.

There were many places that had become barren lands, beyond recovery.

"We need to change the way the Adventurer's Guild operates. We should offer greater rewards to those who discover breeding groups of monsters like this."

Everyone nodded at Charlotte's words.

Regardless of whether they could address the issue immediately, it was crucial information. Knowing that monsters were breeding would help prevent future crises and disasters.

Destroying the breeding nests of monsters would eliminate thousands of potential monsters before they were born.

They needed to invest more funds in the Adventurer's Guild and increase the compensation for adventurers.

Even if things were going smoothly, there was an absolute lack of military force to maintain security.

The Emperor forced a bitter smile.

A government that relied on adventurers for maintaining security.

He remembered the day when he had scoffed at such a government, questioning its very existence.

The Holy Empress, who had been silent, flipped through the notebook.

"Of course, this is an important issue, and it's a big deal, but…"

Olivia, holding the notebook, looked at Empress Louise, its source.

“Empress Louise, you said this information came from the Adventurers' Guild?”

“Yes, that's correct.”

“And where is the adventurer now? To reward them for this kind of information, we would have to take away one of the pillars of the Empire. Are they waiting patiently…?”

“After handing over this information to the Vellodosia branch in the northeastern part of Kernstadt, the adventurer disappeared.”

Olivia, who asked the question.

The other Empresses.

And the Emperor.

They all knew such an answer would come.

But no one had brought it up first.

“All the place names written in this notebook… they are all areas that we haven't reclaimed yet…”

“They are all records of uninhabited areas.”

“And considering the vast amount of information, it couldn't have been recorded in just a few months.”

“Since the handwriting is the same, it was all recorded by one person.”

“It's clear that this information was recorded over a period of years…”

“Although I've heard that adventurers sometimes hunt monsters in dangerous areas, this must have been recorded by someone who lived in those dangerous areas, right?”

“If such a high-level adventurer was registered with the Adventurers' Guild, there's no way we wouldn't know their name…”

“And yet that person handed over such valuable information and disappeared without even waiting for a reward…”

“It must be someone who can't receive a reward.”

“And in that state, that person would have had to be quite a savage to do this sort of thing for several years in an uninhabited area…”

“A normal person wouldn't have the ability nor the reason to do this.”

“Someone who did something that nobody else had a reason to do, but someone had to do it, without anyone telling them to…”

An adventurer who wandered the dangerous, uninhabited areas where people did not live, and survived.

An adventurer who handed over valuable information that deserved a huge reward and then disappeared.

A powerful person who could survive in the land of monsters for such a long time, collecting and recording this information.

But even after collecting that information, they simply threw it away and disappeared.

It was likely because even the land of humans was a dangerous place for that adventurer.

So, that person didn't just disappear, that person must have fled.

Everyone knew this the moment they saw the notebook.

Olivia had just brought it up first.

The eyes of the Holy Empress narrowed.

“It must be Ellen, right?”

Everyone knew that the author of this notebook was Ellen Artorious.

“We could do a handwriting comparison.”

The Archmage carefully spoke to the Emperor.

In the temple, there were still items that Ellen used during her time at the temple, including test papers and other documents.

So, if they compared the handwriting, they could find out if it was really written by Ellen.

“Yes, it's better to be sure, so let's do the handwriting comparison.”

However, both the Archmage who brought up the idea and the Emperor who approved it knew the result without hearing it.

They didn't remember the handwriting, but they knew that such neat writing and concise yet accurate drawings could hardly be anyone else's but Ellen's.

Her usually calm demeanor was apparent in her handwriting and drawings.

Ellen Artorious must have known that her identity would be discovered.

But she had deemed it more important to convey the urgent matter first.

The results of the handwriting comparison would come out soon.

And for now, they had to think about what they should do under the assumption that Ellen was the one who wrote this.

The Emperor spoke quietly.

"She must be on the run."

He would never entertain the optimistic thought that her identity would remain hidden.

And even if her identity was not exposed, as the most wanted criminal, Ellen had to get out of human territory as quickly as possible.

"When, where, and how did this information come to light?" the Emperor asked, looking at Empress Louise.

"Last Saturday, these documents arrived in Vellodosia, a stronghold city in the northeastern part of Kernstadt. After reviewing the contents of the notebook at the guild, they determined its importance and sent the documents to the adventurer guild headquarters in Kiel, the capital of Kernstadt, on Sunday morning. Normally, the documents should have gone to the adventurer guild's main headquarters on the Imperial Capital, but the Kiel adventurer guild master, recognizing the urgency of the matter, seems to have reported it directly to the Kernstadt royal family."

The documents, which arrived on Saturday, reached the Imperial Palace on Monday night after passing through Sunday.

It was unusual for information from the adventurer's guild to reach the Imperial Palace, so they had made a quick decision about its importance.

In order to report to the Emperor even a little faster, they had ignored the usual chain of command to some extent. The report that should have gone to Heinrich, the king of Kernstadt, came to the regent first.

It was not reported to Louise, the regent of Kernstadt, but to Louise, the Empress.

That was why Louise von Schwarz was the first to obtain the information.

As it was an urgent matter, they chose the route that would allow them to report to the Emperor as quickly as possible.

The response of the Kernstadt adventurer guild headquarters could not be considered slow; they had dealt with the situation flexibly.

But in the end, there was a two-day gap.

"In two days, she couldn't have left Kernstadt yet," said Louise.

Charlotte nodded at her words.

"Vellodosia is the most important stronghold city for the northeastern reconstruction of Kernstadt. Of course, there are small and medium-sized cities around it, as well as a significant number of strongholds, including forward bases."

"Since the information could have been discarded or lost if it was handed over to a small local adventurer guild, Ellen had no choice but to enter the stronghold city," Harriet agreed, as if it was certain that Ellen had to take the risk of entering deep into human territory.

If it had been a local city's adventurer guild, the information could have been discarded by an official's judgment of low credibility or lost during transfer.

She would naturally want to avoid such risks.

"Regardless of which direction she escapes, two days is too short a time. Ellen Artorious is still within the borders of Kernstadt, Your Majesty."

“…I suppose so," the Emperor nodded quietly.

Since the Gate Incident, her whereabouts had been a mystery, and there had been countless sightings due to misconceptions or mistakes.

For the first time in such a situation, Ellen's location was almost certainly revealed.

If they lost her now, they would not know where she had gone.

Even this small trace had only been left because she felt it was necessary to deliver extremely important information herself.

The world was too vast.

This was essentially their first and last chance.

"Will anyone else know that these documents were written by Ellen, besides us?" the Emperor asked, posing an unexpected question.

"These notebooks had passed through many hands before reaching this point. The likelihood that others would have the same thoughts as we did was quite high."

The information had already been reviewed by countless people. It had undergone verification by many, which allowed it to be presented to the Emperor.

From low-ranking officials at local adventurer guilds, to high-ranking officials at the headquarters, guild masters, and even the dignitaries of Kernstadt.

Only because it had been approved as credible information could it be brought here.

Everyone knew that an ordinary person could never gather information of this scale.

Thus, it was not difficult to deduce that the person who had submitted this information was the vanished hero, Ellen.

It was impossible for the people present to be certain, but they could make as many conjectures as they liked.

The Emperor felt as if he was already hearing hallucinations.

The voices of numerous officials shouting that the hero must be hunted down seemed to echo in his ears.

There were tasks that had to be done even when he didn't want to do them.

There were tasks he wanted to do but couldn't.

This matter would ultimately be forced upon him as well.

Find the hero.

Kill the hero.

The hallucinations that already filled his head told him of the future.

"Wait… just for a moment… I need to think."

The Emperor stood up from his seat.

In the dim hallway of the Spring Palace's upper floor, where even the banquet attendees did not venture, only the faint sound of music could be heard from afar.

The Emperor stood still, gazing down at the people coming and going in the courtyard.

That area was also, of course, bustling with people enjoying the festivities.

Under the moonlit night, the Emperor silently watched them.

The Emperor was fiddling with something in his grasp.

An object he still couldn't let go of.

He rolled it quietly in the palm of his hand.

Soon, someone approached the Emperor's stiff figure with a rustle of clothing.

"Reinhardt…"

"…Yes?"

The Archmage, Empress Harriet, stood quietly beside him.

"Do it."

"…"

At her simple words, the Emperor remained silent, offering no response.

"I wish you would."

The Emperor did not respond to the Empress's words.

No, it was more accurate to say he couldn't.

"We may never have another opportunity like this. We've prepared so much for this moment, haven't we?"

The proliferation of monsters was a desperate truth, but the current situation was also a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

They might not get another chance if they let it slip away.

The Emperor quietly opened his mouth.

"I'm sorry."

“…For what? So suddenly?"

Harriet tilted her head, looking at the suddenly apologetic Emperor.

The Empress remained the same.

She didn't even know why she was being apologized to.

In the end, the Emperor carefully embraced the flustered Empress.

"I'm sorry for making you say such things."

"Ah…”

"It wasn't because I needed time to think about it."

Within the strong embrace of the Emperor, Harriet quietly smiled.

"I didn't want to hear an apology."

“…Don't make me feel even more sorry."

“…What do you want me to do?"

The grumbling Empress also tightly embraced the Emperor.

There was no time to hesitate.

Nor was there much time to ponder.

"Alright, let's do it."

However, everyone knew that a moment like this would eventually come.

And so, they were always prepared.

The Emperor soon returned to the conference room.

His contemplation was over.

His resolve was firm.

He was ready.

The hero was one of the last remaining sources of trouble for the Empire.

“We've left her alone for far too long.”

The hero was an entity that, if recklessly dealt with, could cause a chain reaction.

But now, they had reduced the danger significantly.

Even if it exploded, it would only emit a brief flash of light.

Killing the hero would no longer cause any significant consequences.

In the early days of the Empire, when there were many who supported the hero, carelessly killing the hero could have caused an enraged faction to rise up against the Empire.

That could have made the establishment of the Empire itself impossible.

Therefore, the Empire could not play around with the hero's name.

Instead, the Empire relied on the hope of the anti-demon king factions who believed in the vanished hero.

Someday, the hero would appear and save us all.

In other words, until the hero appeared, they would do nothing.

In that situation, if the hero carelessly died or rumors of her death spread, those people would be more likely to explode with anger than to fall into despair.

Thus, while those who believed in the hero as their savior wasted their time waiting for the hero who never came, the demon king diligently established the Empire.

During that time, there were several instances of humanity's resistance against evil, all of which were thoroughly crushed.

And now.

The anti-demon king factions were still trapped within the fences of their autonomous region, waiting for the hero who never came, clinging to their threadlike hope.

The hero's death would bring about complete despair for the autonomous region.

Even if they were to become angry, they would now be nothing more than a candle that could be easily snuffed out.

In the end, the despairing autonomous region would submit completely.

Much time had passed.

Through numerous political situations, circumstances, and several wars, a long time

had passed.

Those who believed in the hero were now like candles in the wind.

Even if they were to grow, they could no longer burn with a flame larger than that of a candle.

And so, now.

“As of this moment, the northeastern border of Kernstadt will be completely sealed off.”

The hero could be killed.

CHAPTER 691

That night, the results of the identity verification came out straight away.

As everyone had expected, it was Ellen's.

However, since action had already been taken, the identity verification results only served to reconfirm the facts.

The border closure had already begun, and the Emperor had nearly finished preparing for his campaign.

The news came as a sudden announcement to the people of the Imperial Capital, as well as to all the high officials and imperial nobles.

The New Imperial Family confirmed Ellen Artorius' appearance in the northeastern region of Kernstadt.

All borders in the northeastern region of Kernstadt were sealed off.

And the Demon King himself set out to hunt down the hero.

A name that was both irritating and an enemy of the empire.

The fallen emperor and the hero.

The Emperor himself declared that he would hunt down one of the two.

Indeed, it was a massive movement.

All those who could be considered the Imperial Family's greatest force were summoned, and not only the Kernstadt army but also the entire standing army of the Imperial Capital was called upon.

Many people watched as the enormous army vanished from the Imperial Capital in an instant through the grand-scale mass teleportation created by the Archmage, who had become a living legend.

Just by witnessing the Archmage's magic with their own eyes, the people were overwhelmed.

Naturally, this massive movement not only put the entire Imperial Capital on edge, but also spread throughout the continent in a flash, thanks to the people traveling through the warp gates installed in the Imperial Capital.

Within a few days, word of the Emperor's hunt for the hero had spread across the entire continent.

This time, unlike before, the Demon King himself took action.

Something that had never happened before.

Therefore, everyone knew that this time it was real.

The long and bitter enmity between the two was finally coming to an end.

However, something had changed from the past.

Nobody thought the Emperor would be defeated.

The hero, who had nothing.

The Emperor, who had everything.

The outcome of their battle seemed obvious.

Naturally, the rumors spread even to the autonomous region.

The followers of the hero rejoiced at the news that their vanished hero was still alive, but they also wept.

They knew the hero had no chance of victory because they, who hated the Demon King, knew best.

They were the ones who had either watched from afar, heard about, or experienced the Demon King's massacre, known as the Godless.

A single Demon King had routed armies, which had fled and gathered in the

autonomous region.

Amid the learned fear and despair, the autonomous region and the believers of the hero religion could not help but acknowledge that without the Demon King's mercy, their existence would have been impossible.

So, while they believed in the hero, they ultimately knew that the fortune granted to her by the heavens had reached its end, and they could not help but lament.

"Ten silver coins."

"Yes, here."

Ellen took an apple from the market and bit into it.

With a crisp sound, the sweetness spread.

It had been so long since Ellen had tasted sweetness that she shivered and felt goosebumps on her spine. As she walked down the street, she shivered at the sensation she had not felt in so long.

Only those who have been away from civilization for a long time know how to appreciate it.

Being able to eat an apple that was neither grown nor harvested by oneself.

Being able to do so just by paying a few silver coins.

One might think about eating an apple in the wild, but actually searching for one would be nothing more than foolishness.

Finding a tree or a root to eat would be a blessing, but an apple? That would be absurd.

However, in the city, a few copper coins made it possible.

Feeling a sudden, unexpected gratitude, Ellen didn't neglect to survey her surroundings.

Wearing a hood or hiding her face didn't particularly arouse suspicion. There were many others like her, after all.

Compared to the previous era, the New Empire was still unstable, and the crime rate was incomparably higher. Consequently, there were many fugitives and people hiding their identities.

Ellen was able to enter the city boldly due to the New Empire's instability.

Of course, if she were stopped for a random check, it would become a big problem.

Ellen walked along the edge of the street, crunching on an apple.

She had no money.

But, fortunately, Ellen encountered a thief on the way into the city.

For others, it would have been misfortune, but for Ellen, it was a stroke of luck.

The thieves who approached her like a windfall handed over their money without knowing who she was.

One gold coin, ten silver coins, and thirty copper coins were all the thief had, but they became Ellen's funds.

Since the thief had been knocked out without discovering her identity, there was no risk of being exposed.

Thus, Ellen could gratefully munch on an apple, which she had bought using the money received from the thief who had attempted to rob her.

The reason she had come to the city instead of the outskirts was that she needed information.

—---

‘I heard a hero appeared in the northeast.’

‘Eh, it's probably another lie. Weren't there one or two people in this neighborhood who claimed to have seen a hero or the Fallen Emperor?’

‘No, they say it's different this time. It seems even the Demon King has gone on an expedition.’

‘The Demon King?’

‘Yeah. If the Demon King, who never moved before, has taken action, something must be going on.’

‘Huh… What's going to happen then?’

‘I don't know. The Royal Knights and the Archmages are all out searching for the hero, bloodshot-eyed. They say the entire border has been sealed off. Not even an ant can move. They're conducting thorough searches, of course.’

‘Geez… Something big must have happened… ’

‘Still, the hero is a hero, right? She won't be caught so easily, right?’

‘The Demon King is a god, you know. Haven't you heard the story of the battle at the Meran Plains?’

‘Do you really believe that? It's all lies.’

‘Of course it's true! The survivors of that battle can't sleep just by hearing the Demon King's name.’

‘You have to make sense, man. No matter how great the Demon King is, how can he wage a war alone?’

‘That's why he's the Demon King!’

—---

Among the numerous stories she heard on the streets, Ellen picked out the information she needed.

She had an idea of what her actions would bring about.

But even if it gave a hint of her appearance somewhere, she deemed it crucial information that had to be shared urgently.

If the nation didn't take measures and establish countermeasures, the situation would undoubtedly worsen beyond control.

As a result, the northeastern border of Kernstadt was completely sealed off.

She couldn't know how far the Empire's blockade would extend, but it was probably impossible to pass through there.

The important thing was that Kernstadt's territory had expanded beyond the Empire's.

If the Imperial Army and the Kernstadt Army were deployed, they could establish a complete blockade along the northeastern border.

However, Ellen judged that they wouldn't have the capacity beyond that, and it was indeed true.

Despite the circumstances, Ellen had entered the city for a reason of her own.

It was impossible to gather information in the uninhabited area.

She couldn't know whether her true identity had been discovered or learn about the military's movements.

Thus, she had to enter the city to assess the situation.

And secondly, Ellen wasn't in the northeastern part of Kernstadt.

She wasn't trying to leave Kernstadt, but rather, she was going deeper into it.

She was heading toward the southwestern part, which was the exact opposite of the area with a blockade line and frequent inspections.

So, the army was blockading the wrong place.

After submitting the information to the adventurer's guild in Vellodosia, Ellen hurriedly left the city.

And she ran like mad.

Not toward the northeastern direction where she had entered Kernstadt, which was the closest nation to the uninhabited area, but toward the southwest.

Anyone could see that the information was suspicious, regardless of its validity.

If she clumsily tried to escape through the entrance to Kernstadt, she could get stuck between the blocked borders. Ellen had anticipated this situation.

She couldn't be caught now after evading capture for so long, no matter what the intention was behind the pursuit.

That's why Ellen chose to go deeper.

In the opposite direction of the blockade line.

And as a result of risking her life to enter the city, she found out that the blockade line had indeed been set up in the northeastern region, as expected.

Of course, if nothing was found at the blockade line for a long time, they might predict that she had actually gone deeper into Kernstadt.

So, she couldn't rest. She just needed to reach the southwestern border as quickly as possible.

That border might have been blocked as well, but she didn't have to cross it.

She had obtained the necessary information.

There was no need to stay in the city any longer.

So, Ellen left the city, trying not to look suspicious but moving quickly.

And when she finally escaped the city and bit into her last apple:

-Crunch

"…”

I should have bought one more.

And.

Ellen regretted it for just a moment.

Ellen ran in places where there were few people.

Running on the road would obviously be suspicious if anyone saw her, so she ran through the forests and mountains where there were no people.

She had no time to spare, and the empire was no fool; they would surely realize that she wasn't where the blockade line was set up.

So, she had to move quickly through Kernstadt whenever she could.

She was undertaking the incredible task of almost crossing the entire nation to escape.

Focusing solely on moving, not hunting monsters or evading pursuers.

She had to pass through some cities, but there were some she had no choice but to enter.

She had to keep track of the empire's movements, which could be changing in real-time.

While Ellen fled in the opposite direction, rumors of the hero's appearance had already spread throughout Kernstadt.

Not only Kernstadt but the entire continent was now paying attention to the northeastern part of Kernstadt.

Whether the hero would be caught or not. Whether the Demon King could finally put an end to the tiresome relationship with the hero.

Debates raged everywhere.

Though within the territory of Kernstadt, there were undoubtedly those who said that this time, the Demon King would be killed by the hero.

Ellen had no interest in individual opinions.

The truth hidden within those opinions.

The fact that the empire was still setting up barricades, and the hero was waiting to escape.

The fact that she had not yet fully grasped her own location.

That was enough for her.

Ellen purchased only the minimum amount of food in the city and quickly left after checking the movements of the imperial army.

Her desire to sleep in a bed was immense, but she could not even attempt such a luxury.

She could move without a horse over distances where one would normally need to ride.

Even though she couldn't properly sleep, Ellen, the extraordinary among the extraordinary, couldn't afford to let her guard down.

If the imperial army had discovered her movements, she had to change her escape route now, and she couldn't afford to be negligent in gathering information.

Thus, she fled in the opposite direction, passing through the center of Kernstadt and arrived at a certain city.

In that city, Ellen didn't find any frightening information that the imperial army had caught onto her movements.

However, she obtained completely unexpected information.

"The hero was caught?"

"…?"

That was a story Ellen couldn't have even guessed.

The hero had been captured.

Ellen, who was the hero herself, couldn't help but be bewildered by this sudden story.

I'm here, so who exactly was captured?

It could be a misunderstanding, a mistake, or even a false rumor. Many people have picked up false rumors created by individuals and spread them without thought.

However, everyone passing by was talking about it.

"It was an incredible battle, but it seems the hero is still a hero."

Moreover, a battle had even taken place.

"How can anyone stand against the demon king?"

"Hmm. Even if she’s a hero, she can't reach the demon king who has the archmage with him, can she?"

"There's even a rumor that the archmage is stronger than the demon king these days…”

"That's true…”

"Ugh. So, it came to this."

Some praised the greatness of the demon king, while others lamented the hero's defeat.

Ellen hurriedly left the city.

Something was off.

The situation was going awry.

She was certain she had been heading towards the southwest of Kernstadt.

But the hero was captured.

An enormous battle had taken place between the demon king and the hero.

Who fought with whom?

Ellen had no choice but to visit the city and confirm the situation while speeding up her steps due to the strange rumors.

Numerous armies had witnessed the battle between the demon king and the hero, and they had boldly fought one-on-one.

The archmage hadn't even lent a hand.

In the end, the demon king had forced the hero into submission and sent her to the imperial capital. That's what the story spread.

It couldn't be a false rumor. Far too many people were saying the same thing.

They even said it was truly Ellen Artorius. That was the word going around.

Ellen couldn't understand what had happened.

As time passed, and in the next city, she heard discussions about Ellen's fate while she was there.

"They're going to execute her publicly."

"People will flock to the imperial capital."

"They're apparently building a massive execution platform."

The hero had been defeated by the demon king.

She was sent to the imperial capital.

A public execution was planned.

Who was captured, and what was the intention?

Ellen gave up trying to figure it out.

First, she had to get out of Kernstadt. Fortunately, there were no suspicious checkpoints or heightened security anywhere due to the news of the hero's capture.

They could safely escape like this.

Thus, in the last city she stopped in before almost reaching their destination.

‘The hero has been executed.’

Ellen couldn't help but realize that the strange show orchestrated by the empire had finally reached its conclusion.

‘In the end… the Demon King is victorious.’

In the midst of these strange circumstances, Ellen walked absentmindedly through the streets.

What was the purpose of all this? Faking the capture of the hero and publicly executing an imposter.

But Ellen was still alive.

No one would search for a dead hero, so there would be no one left seeking salvation from Ellen.

Was it their own kind of consideration?

Did they never plan to capture Ellen in the first place?

If Ellen were to accidentally reveal herself, it would be exposed that the public execution was a sham. That would be nothing but bad news for the Demon King's Empire.

The imposter hero's execution might have a powerful effect for now, but Ellen's very existence was a potential threat.

'Is this… telling me to leave where humans live… forever…?'

It could be both mercy and a warning.

They would let Ellen be considered dead, as long as Ellen never showed up again.

The emperor's army was initially for the purpose of suppressing and intimidating the fake hero, and even staging the execution as a show.

But why now?

Why did they remain silent for years and choose to act now of all times?

It was the most dangerous timing for the Empire's self-directed play to be exposed.

In fact, Ellen was currently within Kernstadt's territory.

If Ellen had known what was happening, she would have fled far away from human lands, in case the empire's fake execution show was exposed.

Ellen would have hesitated to hand over the documents she had been recording so far.

The exact reason was unknown.

What mattered was that the hero was believed to be dead.

Though Ellen never intended to reveal herself in the first place, she now had to live even more quietly.

She couldn't help the empire that Reinhardt had established, but she also couldn't harm it.

Would the empire set Ellen free like this?

With that, Ellen walked through the city.

This city was her last stop.

The border of Kernstadt was still far away, but she would soon arrive at her

destination.

Ellen was never headed for the border region of Kernstadt in the first place.

The southwestern edge of Kernstadt.

In such a situation, with only one step left.

As Ellen walked the main road, she saw something in an alley.

Small animals crouching in the warm sunlight.

-Meow

-Cheep

Four cats were basking in the sun at a corner of the road.

"…"

In the midst of a series of bizarre and grotesque events, Ellen couldn't help but faintly smile.

Cats.

At some point, they had become special animals to Ellen.

Because they were animals that had helped Ellen endure difficult and painful times.

Cats were urban animals, so there was no chance of seeing them in the fields.

So whenever Ellen rarely visited a city, she could see various cats. Each time, Ellen would involuntarily smile as she remembered those difficult yet oddly comforting times.

Was he still doing well?

Such worried thoughts naturally surfaced.

Ellen hadn't seen him since leaving him at the temple.

He would occasionally visit, then disappear.

The cat would return just when it seemed he was gone forever.

Ellen had never given a name to that black cat.

Undoubtedly, his fur had been glossy and black like that.

Naturally, among the cats, Ellen's gaze was drawn to the black one.

There was something around the black cat's neck.

Could it be a domestic cat?

Or was it abandoned?

But what was hanging around the cat's neck was neither a bell nor a collar.

Ellen's eyes widened.

"…!"

A round, ivory-white object.

It looked like a piece of the moon embedded in the sun.

It was unmistakably the same as the amulet Ellen had received from Dettomorian.

It wasn't just similar.

It wasn't just alike.

Both the cat and the amulet were the same.

The image in Ellen's memory was not even slightly different.

"You, you… you… are… why… are you here…?"

Ellen's lips trembled.

In an impossible place.

An animal that couldn't possibly be there.

Wearing an impossible necklace, right in front of Ellen.

-Meow

It cried softly.

CHAPTER 692

If human thoughts were like tangled threads, Ellen's thoughts were now a complete mess, twisted and knotted together.

It was impossible to know where the tangle began, and therefore, it was impossible to untangle it.

She couldn't make sense of anything.

There was no way she could understand why the cat, still wearing the necklace she had thrown away, had appeared not in the temple but in a city thousands of kilometers away in the southwest of Kernstadt.

Ellen ran away.

She fled without even knowing why.

Without thinking, she turned into an alleyway and ran like a madwoman.

What had happened?

How did everything come to this?

She thought about it, but couldn't find any answers. In this state of confusion, Ellen ran aimlessly.

She just sprinted through the narrow alleyways.

The tangled maze of alleys was exactly like the confusion in Ellen's head.

Her whole body was covered in cold sweat, her breath was labored from the running, which she was painfully accustomed to.

"Haah… Haah…”

It was terrifying.

Frightening.

Eerie.

She felt like something had happened to her.

Like she had been tricked.

Even now, she felt the fear of running away from someone's grasp.

The cat that had always been with her.

The cat that had been her refuge.

The cat, which had remained a fond memory from her difficult past, had become the object of her fear in a completely unexpected situation.

Running through the alleyways, Ellen no longer knew where she had come from or where she was going.

Was she running in circles?

Or was she actually getting somewhere?

Should she scale the walls and buildings to escape the city quickly?

"Huff… Huff… Huuah…"

Overwhelmed by an unknown fear, she glanced behind her, but nothing was following her.

She ran without even knowing what she was fleeing from.

Though nothing pursued her, the thought that something was chasing her filled her mind.

She couldn't tell what it was.

But it felt like someone knew everything.

She thought she was running away.

But in reality, she was still in their grasp.

There was no other way to explain everything that had happened.

"Haah… Haah… Haah…"

-Kaang! Thud!

At the end of her aimless escape, stepping on and tripping over garbage and boxes in the alley, Ellen saw the surroundings gradually becoming whiter as she ran through an unfamiliar alley, not knowing where she had gone wrong.

"What… is this?"

Suddenly, there was fog.

It was impossible in the bright weather.

But unable to stop, Ellen continued running, turning corners in the alley.

However, as the fog closed in, Ellen couldn't help but feel the strangeness that had come upon her once again.

She had definitely been running through an alley blocked on both sides.

But as the fog invaded her space, everything disappeared.

Even the walls of the buildings that had been supporting her on either side.

Even the ground she had been stepping on was obscured by the fog around her ankles.

Fog surrounded her in all directions, and every nearby landmark vanished.

No matter where she walked in the open space, she could see or feel nothing other than the fog.

A chill crept over her.

She couldn't tell what kind of magic had befallen her, if it was magic at all.

Although she wasn't immune to it, ordinary magic could neither harm nor interfere with Ellen.

But somehow, she had fallen into the maze of some unknown magic.

Ellen ran, lost and aimless.

In a strange space where one couldn't tell whether the end would be visible if they ran, she ran recklessly.

Was it going in circles?

Was she going anywhere?

Ellen couldn't find a way out of this maze.

Just running vaguely, running and running.

"Haah… Haah… Haah…"

At the moment when the thought of collapsing from the breath that filled her up to her chin came to her mind-

-Whooosh!

"Hu, huu…!"

Suddenly, the fog cleared.

And then, Ellen saw it.

The tall, burning sun and the bright blue sky.

The white sandy beach that appeared out of nowhere.

-Swoosh

And the waves.

-Splash

Ellen had arrived at a coastline where transparent emerald waves rolled in.

What happened?

Where was this place?

Was it a real place that existed in reality?

With those thoughts, Ellen looked at the beach with trembling eyes.

There he was.

As if by fate.

At one corner of the beach, Reinhardt was there.

The amulet she once wore.

The amulet that had just hung around the neck of a black cat.

"Have you run away now?"

Now, it hung around Reinhardt's neck.

After wandering through an unknown maze, Ellen arrived at a beach.

She couldn't help but know everything.

What had happened so far?

The black cat was Reinhardt.

She was not tied down by anything, nor restrained.

-Swoosh

The waves that rolled in and the distant cries of seabirds were the only things that invaded the silence between them.

As Reinhardt approached, Ellen could only tremble.

All she could do was watch Reinhardt come closer while shaking, and slowly back away, little by little.

Although she couldn't tell where she was, it was clear that he already knew her location.

"H-how… How…”

As Ellen's words, scared by the incomprehensible situation, reached him, Reinhardt shrugged his shoulders.

"You're not a fool. You wouldn't try to escape the same way you entered."

He had read her.

"That place was the last city."

He even knew where she would end up.

From the moment she entered Kernstadt, he knew she would head southwest.

Kernstadt southwest.

"The last city before entering the Sren Mountains."

There was a massive mountain range there.

"Did you think I wouldn't know that you were trying to go to Rezaira?"

Ellen's hometown.

The Demon King knew that Ellen would flee in the direction of Kernstadt's southwest, where her hometown, Rezaira, was.

He had long known that Ellen wouldn't disappear beyond the southwestern border,

but would head to the Sren Mountains.

"Of course, I thought you'd go that way."

Entering from the northeast and heading to the southwest.

Once the route was known, it was obvious which cities she would pass through and where she would end up.

There was a high possibility that her whereabouts had been known from the middle.

While retreating step by step, Ellen eventually cornered herself.

The Demon King gripped Ellen's chin and peered into her eyes.

"Do you think it would have made a difference if you had arrived at Rezaira without being detected?"

"…"

"You may not know, but I've been there already."

"What…?"

That was a story Ellen had never heard before.

Ellen had only briefly mentioned Rezaira to Reinhardt a long time ago, in passing.

She hadn't expected him to remember that.

That's why she thought he would have no idea at all.

But not only did he remember, he had even been to Rezaira himself.

When exactly?

Even if Ellen had finally reached Rezaira, Reinhardt could have come to Rezaira and found Ellen.

From the moment Ellen entered Kernstadt, the Demon King knew where she was

heading.

Even if she had escaped safely, he could have entered her final destination.

Escape had been impossible from the start.

Ellen swallowed, her chin held firmly in his grip.

In Reinhardt's piercing, scrutinizing gaze, Ellen couldn't even move.

She felt a vague fear.

A vague pain.

Reinhardt released her chin and stepped back.

Just moments ago, she had been in a city in Kernstadt, but suddenly, she had arrived at a tropical beach.

"Where… where is this…?"

Reinhardt shrugged his shoulders, pointing behind Ellen.

Not at the beach, but toward the interior of the island.

As Ellen turned around, there was a mansion.

It was a bizarre sight.

A beach out of nowhere, a mansion out of nowhere.

The mansion was certainly not present in any of her memories.

"You really don't know?"

Reinhardt asked.

The scenery was similar to the Grantz Duchy's villa on the Edina Archipelago she had visited once, but the mansion was clearly different.

Ellen gazed into the distance.

A landscape that could only be called a tropical forest stretched out before her.

She wondered where such a place could be.

There was only one landscape in her memory.

"Could it be… here… we… before…"

"Yes."

Reinhardt nodded.

"The uninhabited island we visited during our group mission in the past."

An unknown uninhabited island.

A place where they had once conducted a group mission.

It wasn't a place that didn't exist in reality; it was definitely real.

But now, there was a newly built mansion that hadn't been there before.

She didn't know how she had gotten here or what the mansion was.

She couldn't even understand why he had brought her here.

In that place, which was a pleasant memory from a difficult but ultimately good period, Ellen and Reinhardt had returned.

She didn't know why he had brought her here.

She didn't know what he wanted to do.

Reinhardt offered no explanation.

If he were to say something resentful, could she bear it?

A traitor.

A runaway.

In reality, she had no excuse to offer Reinhardt.

Without any explanation, she had left for her own reasons.

She couldn't refute any sorrow, anger, or resentment she might hear.

She didn't have the confidence to persuade him.

Fearing what she might hear, Reinhardt said nothing to the trembling Ellen.

He simply picked up a thick branch from the scattered branches around them.

Swish!

Without realizing it, Ellen caught the branch he suddenly threw.

"I don't know about the rest."

Reinhardt also picked up a branch.

"Let's have a sword fight, like old times."

For some reason, Reinhardt wore a playful smile reminiscent of their time at the temple.

Holding the branch like a training sword, Reinhardt slowly approached Ellen, aiming at her.

However, just thinking about those days made Ellen's heart ache.

And so.

"Ah… ugh…”

Facing each other like this was overwhelming, and tears burst forth.

However, even though Reinhardt's attitude was playful, there was no playfulness in his grip.

"Tsk."

Seeing Ellen sobbing, Reinhardt lightly kicked the sand and rushed at her.

"You're wide open."

-Smack!

"Ah… ow!"

Distracted by sadness and longing, Ellen was hit on the head by the branch, and she crumpled to the ground.

"Ugh…"

Reinhardt looked down at Ellen, who was crying and collapsed, and laughed.

"Are you not going to snap out of it?"

"…"

"Who do you think you're up against right now?"

The Apostle of the War God.

The Demon King of Flames.

The ruler of the continent.

She was facing Reinhardt, the great emperor.

Of course, he was holding a tree branch at the moment.

"Get up, we're going again."

Sniffling, Ellen staggered to her feet.

The tip of the tree branch she was barely holding trembled.

What was the point?

Would things go back to the way they were if they fought like this with just a branch?

So much had changed, and they had spent so much time apart.

This wouldn't bring them back, she knew that.

What did he want?

His heart, his attitude.

It was too heartbreaking and sad, Ellen couldn't concentrate.

Ellen wanted to go back more than anyone.

But she couldn't because she couldn't allow herself.

Because she was a sinner, and she couldn't do it due to her guilt.

"Reinhardt… I… I can't… I can't do it…"

So, her fingertips trembled.

"Is that so?"

"Uh… yes… I can't… I can't do it… I'm sorry… I'm sorry. It's my fault. I'm sorry…"

Seeing Ellen crying and barely standing, Reinhardt's eyes changed.

"Then."

The playfulness disappeared.

Aura gathered around the tree branch.

"Die."

It wasn't a light leap.

The moment she came to her senses, Reinhardt was already close, and the ordinary tree branch had become an Aura Blade that pierced Ellen's side.

She was going to die.

At that moment.

Swoosh!

Ellen's tree branch, also infused with aura, barely deflected the fatal thrust.

"Ha… haa… ha…”

Pushed back by the tremendous impact, Ellen took a few steps back, wide-eyed, and caught her breath while looking at Reinhardt.

Reinhardt smiled again, draping the aura-infused branch over his shoulder.

"See, you're doing just fine."

Don't make excuses if you can do it.

Reinhardt added that and aimed the branch at Ellen again.

She didn't know what he wanted.

But nothing would end until she fought back without complaint.

So, Ellen held back her tears, and aimed her tree branch at Reinhardt.

He smiled, seemingly satisfied with her attitude.

CHAPTER 693

For the two whose bare bodies were weapons, even a tree branch could become an excellent weapon.

The importance of a weapon with aura imbued in it wasn't significant unless it was a relic-level item.

As Reinhardt requested, Ellen imbued the tree branch with aura, and sometimes they fought using only the branches.

Ellen lost most of the time.

It was too difficult for her to compose herself emotionally, and she couldn't concentrate because the unbearable guilt from just meeting Reinhardt's gaze.

So.

-Smack!

"Ugh!"

-Thwack!

"Argh!"

-Whack!

"Uh……"

-Crash!

"Gasp!"

She had been hit for a long time.

Reinhardt didn't really intend to kill Ellen, but he didn't go easy on her either.

Ellen was at her limit with exhaustion and fatigue from her long escape, and she couldn't even remember the last time she had rested properly.

She couldn't remember the last time she had eaten properly either.

It was nothing short of a one-sided beating.

She couldn't control her emotions, and her body had already reached its limit.

Her mind felt rather at ease.

The pain, the suffering.

It was better to be hit like that than to hear verbal criticisms.

It seemed like words would hurt more, so being hit like this was less painful.

It felt like she was receiving punishment for what she had done up until now.

Thinking like that, although it hurt, her heart felt at ease.

However, the pain accumulated.

Her body and mind had already reached their limits long ago.

In the moment when her vision blurred not from sadness but from the pain and the limits of her consciousness, Reinhardt approached and delivered a knee strike.

-Thump!

"Uh… ah!"

Hit by that, Ellen finally lost consciousness.

-Whoosh

Ellen woke up when the sun had set, and night had already fallen on the uninhabited island.

"Uh…!"

As soon as she regained consciousness, she sat up abruptly, realizing the situation in which she had fainted.

Fainting was a rare occurrence for her. Fainting in an uninhabited area was akin to death.

Her body had never been pushed to such extreme conditions before.

Her entire body ached and hurt.

"Are you awake?"

Hearing the voice, she turned her head and saw that Reinhardt was still there.

In front of Reinhardt, a campfire was lit.

-Crackling

And something skewered on a stick was being roasted over the campfire.

It was a huge lobster.

A few shells were scattered around, indicating that some had already been eaten.

Chewing on tree roots and eating a proper meal in the city seemed like a distant memory.

There was hardly any meat to cook in the monster-infested area.

That's why she was always so hungry, not just now.

"Eat."

"…”

At his nonchalant attitude, Ellen couldn't help but hesitate.

It didn't feel right.

It felt like it shouldn't be like this.

It seemed wrong to just dismiss everything so casually.

Ellen couldn't approach or distance herself from Reinhardt, who frowned at her indecision.

"Don't make this difficult, just eat."

"Okay… I'll, I'll eat…"

In the end, fearing Reinhardt's anger, Ellen hesitantly approached the campfire.

Ellen couldn't help but be cautious, as if it was only natural.

Had he caught it himself?

At a glance, his clothes appeared as if they had been soaked and then dried.

It was evident that he had caught it himself.

It was unknown how long she had been unconscious.

But during that time, some vitality had returned to her body.

Reinhardt didn't say a word.

Ellen tore off a cooked lobster claw, separating its tail as well.

It was quite hot to touch with bare hands, but that didn't matter.

Somehow, it was a little pathetic.

It wasn't sad or desperate.

She had failed to escape, even though she had tried.

It wasn't a tearful reunion nor listening to criticism.

If Ellen had heard resentful words that made her want to die, she wouldn't know.

But with no words spoken, it felt like she was going mad.

Swinging around a tree branch, she had eventually been struck and lost consciousness.

And now she was trying to eat the lobster with her bare hands.

Moreover, at the moment, Ellen appeared filthy and disheveled, like a beggar.

Looking like a beggar, she had to eat like one.

And she had to eat in front of the person she least wanted to see her in this state.

But since Reinhardt had prepared it, she couldn't refuse.

It might not have been as significant as her previous mistakes, but refusing would also be a mistake, wouldn't it?

Even in this state, on this occasion.

She was so hungry her tongue stung.

This situation.

Too much.

Too much.

Extremely.

It wasn't sadness or pain.

She was ashamed to the point of wanting to die.

"…"

"What's there to be sorry about? Isn't this too trivial to feel sorry for at this point?"

As Ellen hesitated, Reinhardt frowned, as if suspecting there was another reason.

It wasn't that.

It wasn't because she was sorry or sad.

It was because she was ashamed.

She was too embarrassed to eat.

She couldn't possibly say it.

"No, no… that's not it…”

But in this situation, telling someone she was ashamed or embarrassed was too absurd, so the words couldn't escape her lips.

"Just eat it."

In the end, Ellen couldn't resist Reinhardt's urging and bit into the lobster's tender flesh.

The moment she took a bite, various thoughts flooded Ellen's mind.

It was so delicious she thought her tongue would melt.

It was so sweet.

Why was it so sweet?

It was strange.

There shouldn't have been any sugar in it.

The sweetness, like her brain melting as it passed her tongue, almost made her lose her reason.

She wanted to stuff her mouth with it right away.

But doing so would be too embarrassing.

However, with the juices from the bite splattering around her mouth, she looked like

a beggar no matter how gracefully she tried to eat.

And the thought of wanting to eat gracefully was the most pathetic of all.

As Ellen stood there, unable to do anything while holding a bitten piece of lobster, Reinhardt quietly observed her.

With a sour expression, Reinhardt spoke.

"From the very beginning, when you didn't even bother to wash properly and roamed around the Kernstadt territory, you were worse than a filthy, wild dog. Just eat comfortably."

"!!!!"

It wasn't that she didn't know.

She knew what he was thinking.

In the end, tears welled up in her eyes.

It wasn't because she was too sad.

It was because of the sorrow.

"Ah… Hic…"

"…You're making a fuss."

It wasn't that she hadn't washed, but rather that she couldn't wash.

She held back the urge to say such words, knowing full well that it was likely intentional.

Adding any unnecessary comments wouldn't help the situation anyway.

With a heavy heart, Ellen held back tears and ate her food reluctantly.

And when it wasn't enough, she went into the sea and caught a few more fish.

Reinhardt watched, gritting his teeth and turning his head away with a laugh.

It was nice that he laughed.

And she was grateful he didn't get angry.

But it wasn't a laugh of joy; it was a mocking one.

That mocking laugh made Ellen sadder, and she cried a little more.

Though she tried her best to eat modestly, it was impossible when she had to eat with her bare hands.

Reinhardt looked at Ellen's messy state and distanced himself slightly, as if he was looking at something filthy.

It was indeed sorrowful, sad, and depressing.

But she never imagined that she would feel such sorrow in this way.

She had thought she would receive criticism or blame for running away.

Instead, she was treated like a dirty person, someone so filthy it was hard to associate with, and this brought her sadness and sorrow in a different way.

It wasn't about blaming her.

It was about her being disgusting.

Hearing such things made her mind a mess.

Worse still, Ellen knew better than anyone how dirty she actually looked, which made her even more upset.

"Are you done eating?"

"Uh, um…"

At Reinhardt's question, Ellen cautiously nodded. After putting out the campfire with a few kicks, Reinhardt began walking somewhere.

"Follow me."

"…"

As if he wouldn't accept any objections, Ellen hesitantly stood up and cautiously followed him.

When Ellen got close enough, Reinhardt suddenly quickened his pace.

And then he turned around and laughed slyly.

As if he had thought of a mean prank.

"…Ugh."

"…"

But after seeing Ellen's expression, he closed his mouth.

It was because he saw a pitiful expression that made it seem like Ellen would strangle herself and die if he said another word about hygiene.

That was how cornered Ellen felt at that moment, in a way she couldn't have predicted.

Reinhardt led her to something that didn't originally belong on the deserted island—a mansion.

He opened the gate, went inside, and turned on a lantern.

"You'll find everything you need here. Wash up and rest."

"…Huh?"

"I have a lot to do. I'll come back tomorrow. Or maybe the day after."

Reinhardt left those words behind and exited the mansion.

Wondering what on earth was happening, she opened the door to find that Reinhardt had already disappeared.

It felt as if she had been bewitched.

What was this mansion?

She couldn't even be sure if this was the place they had visited during their group mission on a deserted island.

She had no idea what Reinhardt wanted to do.

But the important thing was, she had been caught.

She couldn't run away.

"Ah…"

That was it.

Ellen realized.

This was a deserted island.

She couldn't swim from an unknown deserted island to the mainland.

With no knowledge of navigation or anything like that, even if she managed to build something like a raft, it would be suicidal to rely on it and head out to the open sea.

There was no escape.

This place was a prison.

Knowing that Ellen couldn't run away, Reinhardt left.

"So… that's how it is…"

Ellen realized that she was, in a way, trapped in the largest prison in the world.

She could break all the physical iron bars.

But the vast natural barrier called the sea was something Ellen couldn't overcome.

A deserted island prison.

There was no better place to imprison Ellen and make her resign herself to her fate.

Ellen cautiously looked around the mansion.

Though she couldn't be sure, it seemed to be set up for her to live alone.

As if to explain that it wasn't a hastily built mansion, there were magical tools that Ellen had never seen before.

Was this really allowed?

It didn't seem right.

But in the end, the thought that she couldn't escape erased all of Ellen's other concerns.

This must have been expected.

It seemed that they had anticipated her eventual resignation.

Perhaps they had anticipated the day when Ellen would be found and had known that she would try to run away like last time.

Was that why such a place was prepared?

Regardless of whose plan it was to create this place, Ellen resigned herself, as the planner intended, and headed to the bathroom.

Clothes to change into were already prepared.

After taking off her dirty clothes, cape, and boots, Ellen washed her body with hot water.

Meticulously.

As if she intended to wash every single strand of hair thoroughly.

After spending a long time busily washing, it still wasn't the end.

She filled the bathtub with water and immersed her body in it.

"…”

She wanted to rest.

She hadn't had a proper rest in years.

Feeling overwhelmed by this extravagant sensation, she wondered if she was allowed to experience it, as strange thoughts engulfed her.

She lay down in the bathtub as if she were sinking.

She couldn't understand what was happening or how things were turning out.

Would it be okay for everything to go by in such a haphazard way?

She couldn't reach any conclusions.

However.

It was too warm, so warm.

It was supposed to be a prison.

Feeling guilty and tormented for receiving such a warm place.

“…Huh."

Ellen cried again.

CHAPTER 694

How long had it been since she slept in a bed?

How long had it been since she fell asleep without worry of ambush, completely relaxed?

When Ellen woke up, she was startled by the sensation of the pillow touching her face and sat up.

Her instincts, honed by her lifestyle thus far, made her fear comfort.

-Chirp!

The sound of birds from the jungle beyond the window and the distant sound of waves told her that yesterday's events were not just a dream.

"Ah…"

Everything had felt surreal since yesterday.

From the reunion with the black cat to this very morning, every moment felt like a strange lie.

Perhaps it was a dream she had after falling asleep from exhaustion in front of the campfire.

Or maybe it was a vision right before death due to her body's limits.

But no matter how hard she tried to come to her senses, she could only accept it as reality.

Usually, she would have been busy packing her things and setting off as soon as she woke up.

Walking, sometimes running.

Killing monsters.

Chewing on tree roots.

Sleeping rough, hardly even lying down.

Waking up on a soft, fluffy bed after spending such monotonous days felt incredibly unfamiliar.

Unfamiliar, but…

"Uh…"

Ellen rolled around in her pajamas, hugging her blanket for quite a while.

She felt foolish, but she just couldn't bring herself to get up.

Ellen took a shower, feeling grateful for the availability of water wherever and whenever.

After changing into a prepared white cotton dress, she sat blankly for a moment.

-Gurgle

She was hungry.

She was always hungry.

To be honest, even what she had eaten yesterday hadn't satisfied her completely.

The hunger carved into her bones over the years seemed like it would never be filled, no matter how much she ate.

Ellen headed to the kitchen.

Not only were there plenty of ingredients in the food storeroom, but the kitchen was also fully equipped with all necessary systems and cooking tools.

It had been difficult to afford the luxury of cooking food in the field.

But she had learned a lot from watching Reinhardt during her time in the temple.

Once you know the basics, applying them isn't hard.

As long as she had the ingredients, she could cook anytime.

For the first time in a long while, Ellen picked up a kitchen knife instead of a combat knife and began to cook.

Not that she made anything particularly amazing.

She had intended to make the meat stew she used to love.

It wasn't anything extraordinary, but she planned to make a lot of it.

She wanted to relieve the pent-up frustration from the enforced fasting she had endured.

So, she made an enormous amount.

She made so much that she couldn't possibly finish it all, thinking she'd indulge herself.

With that thought, Ellen took out a huge pot from the kitchen and began to prepare the stew.

It didn't need to be well made.

With her dulled taste buds, anything she ate tasted exquisite. The aroma and flavor of the lobster she had eaten yesterday still seemed to linger on the tip of her tongue.

And so.

Ellen began to eat almost an entire pot's worth of meat stew.

No one was around to judge her for eating so much, as she might have yesterday.

How long had it been since she lost her self-control like this?

She ate for almost two hours.

Her mind was so focused on eating that she didn't notice anything else until suddenly.

-Thud

"!!!!"

The mansion's door abruptly opened, and Reinhardt entered.

Unfortunately, from the door, Reinhardt could see straight into the kitchen.

He saw Ellen, without properly setting the table, scooping up the stew straight from the pot beside the table.

It was then that Ellen noticed the splattered stew on her white dress, making it slightly dirty.

Reinhardt saw her as well.

"…"

"…"

A brief silence passed between them.

Ellen then realized that Reinhardt was not empty-handed.

It seemed like he had brought something similar to a tray.

Judging by its size, it was clear that he had prepared a significant amount, considering how much Ellen would eat.

Undoubtedly, Reinhardt had brought her something to eat.

However, she couldn't wait and had been scooping up stew from the pot.

If she had only been patient, he would have served her a proper meal, but she was hungrily eating away.

"Ah…”

Reinhardt sighed.

It was not a sigh of contempt, but rather one of sympathy.

How hungry must she have been?

It was undoubtedly a sigh of sorrow.

That sigh pierced her heart deeply.

"…”

She had thought that when they met, she would cry.

Because Reinhardt would be afraid.

Because he would feel sorry.

So, it seemed like she would cry.

However, she wondered why she kept feeling embarrassed, and why crying was the only reaction she could muster.

Ellen cried again.

Various foods of different dimensions were placed before her.

Reinhardt laid out a plethora of food in front of Ellen, who sat with the expression of someone who had been caught rummaging through the kitchen on the first night of their diet.

“…I guess I was a bit harsh yesterday."

"Huh? What?"

Out of nowhere, she didn't understand what he was talking about.

"I told you to wash, not to scrub your skin off."

"Ah, right……”

In fact, Ellen's fair skin was still reddened from scrubbing too hard the day before.

The visible parts looked like this, but the hidden parts were probably even worse.

Despite feeling like she could collapse from exhaustion, she had meticulously cleaned every part of her body, even her nails.

It wasn't as if she was preparing for something in particular.

But somehow, it felt like she was getting ready.

She found herself ridiculous and unbelievable, yet she had done so.

Ellen, unable to respond, lowered her head as her face turned red for a different reason.

Imagining the sobbing Ellen scrubbing herself after hearing that she looked like a stray dog from a slum, Reinhardt offered a subtle smile.

"How about it, do you want some noodles?"

"Uh… uh… uh…”

"Sorry, no, hey, I won't do it. Hey, I won't do it. I said I won't!"

"…”

Seeing Ellen on the verge of breaking down in sorrow again, Reinhardt vigorously shook his head.

What he really wanted to talk about was not that.

But he kept teasing her with completely irrelevant things.

His words were so light and trivial, only talking about insignificant matters.

He was clearly doing it on purpose.

Right now, she wasn't angry at his words.

She was so happy, yet so sorry and guilty.

It felt as if everything could go back to the way it was before.

It seemed as if she only needed to accept it.

But she just couldn't.

All she felt was sadness and guilt.

As if understanding her feelings just from her expression, Reinhardt eventually got up from his seat with a bitter smile.

"Eat up, I'll be going."

"…"

Reinhardt, once again showing consideration to not make Ellen miserable, left the mansion.

She couldn't not eat.

Ellen ate the prepared meal.

Every last bite.

Of course, regardless of her feelings, it was delicious.

Such days continued.

Reinhardt didn't come every day. He would skip a day, and he wasn't always there.

There were many times when he would just show his face and leave.

He never really spoke.

He didn't get closer than necessary.

He simply kept a little distance.

It was Ellen who became impatient.

She wished he would say something.

Would he keep her imprisoned like this forever? Would her acceptance of this life be enough?

But she couldn't bring herself to ask.

Guilt took precedence over her questions.

It was unbearable to keep her mouth shut and meet his gaze, let alone ask anything.

She managed to sleep and eat well only for a few days.

She stayed awake through the nights.

This couldn't be the way to live.

She shouldn't be like this.

Even a little bit.

To atone for her sins, to repay even a little of what she had done in the world.

She shouldn't be standing still here.

Such obsession began to surge.

Days were spent in self-reproach and agony.

She thought she would settle into it, but she didn't.

The self-reproach only grew stronger.

The more comfortable she was.

The more peaceful.

The more painful it became.

Her body felt better, but her mind seemed to wear away even more.

After about half a month.

Time passed as Ellen grew impatient and anxious.

Naturally, her mental problems were secondary, and it was enough time to wash away years of accumulated fatigue.

Her innate resilience and stamina were excellent.

Regardless of everything, she ate well and slept well.

During those days, on a still sunny day.

"Come out."

Reinhardt called Ellen outside.

Wearing a white dress, Ellen put on sandals and followed Reinhardt to the beach.

"By now, you should have returned to your original condition, right?"

"Huh? Ah… Yes. Uhm…"

"Then, let's really give it a try."

Swoosh

In Reinhardt's right hand, a sword appeared instead of a tree branch.

Ellen's eyes widened.

The sword of the war god.

Alsbringer.

It was in Reinhardt's hand.

"Do you think I've been feeding and resting you all this time just to raise a useless pig that won't gain weight no matter how much it eats?"

At those harsh words, Ellen nodded her head with a desolate expression.

“…I guess not."

Leaving her alone without saying much up until now was ultimately an extension of the first day.

He had left her alone until she recovered her original condition, both mentally and physically, after pushing her to her limits.

Half a month.

There were days spent with mixed emotions, but it was ultimately enough recovery time for Ellen to be in her best condition.

"Lament, do you have it?"

Do you have it?

Why would he ask that?

Had it disappeared?

At Reinhardt's strange question, Ellen quietly nodded her head.

"Then take it out."

As if he wouldn't permit something like a tree branch again, Reinhardt coldly spoke.

What would happen if she said no?

Hesitating, Ellen cautiously spoke while clutching the hem of her dress as if to protest.

"I… am wearing… a skirt…"

"So what?"

"…"

Ellen had no choice but to feel embarrassed in front of Reinhardt, who spoke as if her clothing choice was none of his concern.

"I already have five wives, do you think I care about your underwear?"

"…"

"Shut up and draw your Lament."

At his harsh, almost sad words, Ellen quietly held her breath.

That's right.

She had no right to argue.

Though she couldn't do everything, she had to do as much as she could.

On the first day, it was hard to bear emotionally, mentally, and physically.

And so, she was beaten until she fainted, quite literally.

Her sword wavered, and so did her heart.

But now, half a month had passed.

It was still difficult, but she had grown a little used to seeing Reinhardt's face after five years.

Her condition had improved.

She felt so refreshed, as if the dirt and grime from her body and mind had been

stripped away after a long rest.

She couldn't remember the last time she had been in such a perfect state.

She had rested well.

She had rested long.

She had eaten well.

The lack of conversation was not because of his worry for Ellen or having nothing to say.

It was merely his intention not to speak until Ellen had fully recovered.

Ellen still didn't know what to do. Whether she deserved forgiveness or if she deserved this kind of life.

This didn't seem right, but there were still things she could do.

Reinhardt wanted to confirm something, and Ellen had now become as prepared as Reinhardt had wished.

Then, she just had to show him.

What Reinhardt wanted to confirm.

That was obvious, wasn't it?

Her confusion and hesitation finally began to subside a little.

As her fear, sorrow, and guilt from being trapped on a deserted island subsided, Ellen's expression finally calmed.

Ellen carefully removed her sandals.

She neatly placed her sandals next to her and stepped onto the white sandy beach with her bare feet.

Reinhardt silently watched Ellen.

After a moment of deep breathing, Ellen looked at Reinhardt.

A calm expression.

A serene gaze.

She returned to the same expression and gaze she had always shown when facing Reinhardt.

"Do you really want to defeat me?"

At Ellen's question, Reinhardt nodded.

"Isn't that obvious?"

On the first day, Ellen had been too weak to be worth fighting.

Reinhardt wanted to check.

How strong had she become?

Comparing him to Ellen, how would it be now?

He intended to prove it by fighting Ellen in her prime condition.

Did he surpass his teacher?

If so, she would oblige.

Ellen gave a faint smile.

There was anger, resentment, and rage.

But he had waited, without showing any emotion, until he was at her full strength because he planned to face her with all her might.

So, putting the next matter aside for now.

She just needed to give it her all.

-Swish

In Ellen's right hand, the Moon's Sword, Lament, appeared.

Ellen couldn't help but notice the change in her divine weapon.

At some point, the Void Sword Lament, which had always been pitch-black as if reflecting the night sky, had returned to a cold silver blade.

"Ah…"

The Void Sword was no longer a Void Sword.

Ellen knew that Lament reacted to sorrow.

Just by being in the same place as Reinhardt, Lament lost its form as a void sword.

Sorrow disappeared all too easily.

It disappeared just by being together.

Am I no longer sad now?

"How about that? Your divine weapon seems to be in poor shape," Reinhardt sneered as if he knew it too.

"And what about Lapelt?"

Reinhardt asked about her not summoning the Sun Cloak.

Ellen smiled brightly.

At her best.

"…Is it really necessary?"

And then she provoked him.

"How embarrassing would it be to summon it later?"

"That's something for later."

Reinhardt aimed Alsbringer and slowly measured the distance between him and Ellen.

There had always been days like this.

It had always been a series of such days.

She couldn't know if it was okay.

For now, she had decided to give it her all, so she wouldn't wait for him to come.

So, she went first.

Swish!

With the skirt of her dress flapping roughly, Ellen's eyes widened as she thrust Lament towards Reinhardt's chest.

Seeing the sharp gaze and the sword's trajectory, Reinhardt smiled.

It was a smile and gaze that seemed to say he wanted this.

Clang!

As Lament and Alsbringer collided, a storm of magical power erupted, and the sand of the white beach was scattered roughly.

From bottom to top.

"I don't know about other things…"

Ellen pushed up her sword and looked up at Reinhardt with a cold gaze.

"You've gotten quite arrogant, Reinhardt."

Ellen Artorius.

The hero, who was already known to the world as dead, pushed aside the demon

king's sword and murmured coldly.

I wronged you.

I betrayed you.

I ran away from you.

But your victory over me is an entirely unrelated issue.

You wanted the best of me, so I'll show you the best of me.

No, it's still okay to give in a little.

Ellen Artorius said with just a glance.

As he pressed down on the sword with force from below, the demon king spoke.

"Isn't this much acceptable?"

Reinhardt pushed back Ellen's sword and grinned maliciously.

Rumble!

The storm of magical power exploded, and the two were thrown back as violently as they had clashed.

Both of them landed properly on the white beach without rolling around.

Clutching Lament, Ellen charged fiercely.

Reinhardt also charged in the same manner.

The skirt of the hero's white dress and the demon king's shirt fluttered violently in the wind.

CHAPTER 695

The skirmish was short-lived.

It lasted a total of thirty-five exchanges.

As Ellen, holding the Lament, parried Reinhardt's sword with her half-swording technique, she pierced through the gap in his dynamic movements, burying his entire body in the white sand.

Thud!

With Reinhardt half-buried in the sand, Ellen climbed on his chest and ended the fight by placing the blade of Lament against his throat.

The blade and their faces were so close, they were almost touching.

"You're dead."

“…Yes, it seems so."

At Ellen's words, Reinhardt nodded.

He even smiled, as if he had wanted to hear those words while being overpowered.

Though the skirmish was brief, the two combatants, who had already turned into monsters, left the white sands utterly devastated.

"Are you going to do more?"

Ellen asked while keeping Lament pointed at his throat.

"No."

Some things can be known from the moment swords are crossed.

Reinhardt hadn't thought he could win from the beginning, and Ellen couldn't help

but realize this.

Ellen knew it too.

A hundred times out of a hundred, she would win.

She knew she would prevail.

So, Reinhardt must have known as well.

Ellen got up from Reinhardt's flattened body and helped him to his feet.

"Sure enough, I can't beat you."

Reinhardt couldn't defeat Ellen with the swordsmanship he had learned from her.

That much remained unchanged.

"Do you really need to beat me?"

"Actually, I don't really want to win."

Reinhardt laughed.

"It's just nice like this."

"…"

"Winning and losing don't matter."

Reinhardt gazed at the waves rolling in.

Waves that surged, broke, retreated, then surged and broke again, only to retreat once more.

As he watched the seemingly eternal ebb and flow.

"What matters is that we can do this."

It wasn't about winning or losing; he had wanted the very fact that they could cross

swords like this.

There would always be a next time.

And a time after that.

He had yearned for that eternal moment, independent of victory or defeat.

That succession of moments, Reinhardt said.

Ellen still didn't know how Reinhardt had managed to overpower her.

How had he done it?

He couldn't even defeat her now.

How could he have overpowered and saved her back then when she was stronger, possessed by a vengeful spirit?

Ellen still didn't know.

And it seemed Reinhardt had no intention of explaining it to her.

In the end, Reinhardt had confirmed what he wanted to know.

Between Ellen and himself, who was stronger?

Ellen was stronger.

The gap remained insurmountable.

Even if he were to lose eternally, he wished to win just once.

He knew that after that single victory, he would return to a continuous string of defeats.

"You may not know, but you're officially dead."

Finally, Reinhardt said what he had wanted to say.

Hearing those words, Ellen felt as if her breath had stopped.

The thought of the real conversation frightened her.

She felt suffocated and scared, not knowing what she would hear.

The Demon King had captured the fake hero and executed her.

The exact method of the staged play was unknown.

However, the hero was dead.

It was done.

"We forcibly brought the autonomous region's representatives and made them watch the public execution. They seemed to enjoy it."

Reinhardt chuckled.

It was a wicked sense of humor.

He couldn't help but think so.

He had forced the representatives of the human autonomous region to watch their hope being executed mercilessly.

Cruel, but undoubtedly effective.

The one who died must have been something like a puppet.

Creating such a thing wouldn't be difficult.

"With this, the annoying hero religion should quiet down, and the autonomous region will slowly dissolve."

"…"

"There won't be anyone left who will project useless hope onto you. You won't have to feel burdened by it anymore."

Those who prayed for Ellen to save humanity, groaning under the Demon King's oppression, would disappear.

Since the symbol of hope, the hero, had died, such an act was now impossible, even with the slightest hope.

"Now, you don't exist in the world, there's no one who needs you, and there's no one who will ask you to do impossible tasks. The hero lost to the Demon King and died. That's the end of the story."

"…"

"People will forget you."

Reinhardt looked at Ellen.

"So, what excuse will you use to run away now?"

"…"

"Even if you can't escape, you still want to run away."

At those words, Ellen bit her lip and bowed her head.

"Just being with me seems unbearable to you."

It was clear from her expression.

She didn't need to say it.

She was suffering in this very moment.

Finally, with those painful words, Ellen couldn't help but open her trembling mouth.

"I'm sorry… I… I'm sorry…"

Regardless of the reasons, how justified or necessary it was.

It was true that she left without even having a conversation with Reinhardt, who had saved her.

It was also true that five years had passed since then.

That time had changed many things.

"…"

"If you're sorry, can you be with me now?"

Ellen couldn't bring herself to say it.

Is there still a place for me?

Is there any part left to spare for me?

She wanted to say yes, but she couldn't.

It was too shameless.

Having left on her own accord, and now caught trying to run away again.

Claiming that everything was resolved and that they could be together now, so casually.

To change her attitude as easily as flipping the palm of her hand.

To accept everything while trapped in this peaceful prison.

Wasn't it too much?

Wasn't it too selfish?

"Can't you do it?"

"Sob… ugh… ugh…"

In the end, Ellen began to cry, gritting her teeth.

She couldn't say it was possible or impossible.

She felt sorry to say it wasn't possible.

And she felt guilty to say she wanted it.

Making excuses, she had been running away at some point.

In the end, she felt pathetic for being caught and only crying.

It was too hard.

It was too lonely.

It was too desolate.

She wanted to say that every day had been painful.

But she couldn't bring herself to say those words.

Finally, after a fortnight of rest, they had a proper conversation.

A conversation filled with nothing but tears.

"I… I don't know… I don't think… I don't think I deserve… to be like this… I don't think… I don't think I can… I don't think I have… the right…"

"Who gives such a right, anyway?"

"I don't know. But… I don't think… I don't think I should be like this… I shouldn't be… I shouldn't be… I shouldn't be like this… I did things… to you… to the world… But what right… what audacity do I have…"

Reinhardt grabbed Ellen's chin as she sobbed, forcing her to look up at the cold eyes.

"I thought so. In the end, you couldn't bear to be with me."

"Whether it's guilt or remorse. Or the fact that we've been apart for too long."

"From the beginning, you could have done anything for the reason you left me."

"The reason you left me five years ago was just an excuse. You just couldn't bear it yourself."

"You didn't leave because you had to."

"You just left because you wanted to."

"If you wanted to be by my side, you could have. There were countless ways to do it. You know that."

There must have been a way for Ellen to be with him if she wanted.

It was just that Ellen couldn't allow herself to do so.

That's why she left.

Even now, when all the other reasons for leaving had disappeared, wasn't the proof that she didn't allow herself to be together?

"You just can't allow yourself."

"You think you're the cause of all this."

"You think the betrayer, you, don't deserve it."

"Even though you know I don't want that, even though you know I don't blame you. You just can't forgive yourself."

"That's why you're crying like this. Even now, when it doesn't matter if you're with me, you're just forcing yourself to suffer for vague guilt."

"Even though you're torturing yourself, nothing gets better. Nothing changes."

"Where is the reason or inevitability for that?"

"There's none."

At Reinhardt's words, Ellen squeezed her eyes shut.

"I know… I know too…"

"I know that doing this… doing this doesn't help anyone or anything… I know it just hurts you and me… I know."

"I know I'm pathetic, and I know I'm stupid and foolish for doing this…"

"But I don't know… I can't erase the thought that if I had done better back then, if I had believed… I can't forgive myself. So, I can't do anything because of my actions, I don't want to forgive myself because of my actions…"

"I don't think I should be with you. I don't know how to break this vicious cycle…"

"I know not everything is my fault, but I can't say it's not either. If I'm even a little comfortable, a little happy, I can't bear myself…"

"I can't even imagine that…"

"I know I'm a fool for feeling this way, I know… I know that nothing can bring back the dead… I know that guilt won't help me live or change anything… But I can't let go… I just can't…"

"I know that the more I feel this way, the more I hurt you… I don't know. I think I've gone mad at some point… I can't think straight… I feel like I'm falling apart…"

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry for running away, for betraying you. I'm sorry for not trusting you. And I'm sorry for wanting to run away again, for not being able to say I want to stay together… But… But…"

"Stop. That's enough. I understand your feelings."

"…"

Reinhardt held Ellen as she sobbed, spewing guilt-ridden nonsense.

Feeling guilty even to meet his gaze, Ellen cried with her eyes tightly closed. The Demon King spoke calmly.

"Do you know what the meaning of the mansion you were in until today and this uninhabited island is?"

"…Yes."

A prison created to make escape impossible.

Placing her in a location where escape was utterly unattainable.

"I prepared this place because I knew you would be like this."

If your mind cannot be changed, I will imprison you in a place where you can never escape.

That was the reality of this place.

"When I found you again, I had all sorts of thoughts on what to do."

"I knew you would be like this, unable to bear yourself."

"This is the result. Harriet and I came up with this."

At the mention of that name, Ellen shuddered.

"I'm not a mage, so how could I have sent you here in the first place?"

The bizarre trap she had fallen into and the undetectable teleportation.

Ellen had no choice but to know that it was Harriet's doing.

"I knew you would say something like this. You would whine and try to run away."

"That's just the kind of person you are."

"It may be cruel, but-"

"If left alone, you would treat yourself even more cruelly."

"It seemed like there was no other way."

Whatever the reason, Harriet had sensed the moment Ellen left that she would spend the rest of her life running away, and the Demon King knew it too.

Even now, she's crying, saying it shouldn't be like this.

She's just cruel to herself.

How could he offer the choice of happiness to someone who thinks they don't deserve to be happy?

The Emperor knew that Ellen would eventually try to run away because her fundamental attitude wouldn't change.

So he tried to force her.

To imprison her.

To confine her.

To bind her forcibly in a place where she couldn't escape, and this was the result of that thought.

A small island in the vast sea and a mansion.

Imprisoning her in a place where she couldn't even tell which direction to run was believed to be the way to stop Ellen's self-deprecation.

Essential supplies could be provided, and she would have no choice but to accept this life, even if she couldn't come to terms with it.

Eventually, she would accept it out of resignation.

Reinhardt, who could clearly see what she was thinking, spoke.

She couldn't refute his words that she would keep trying to run away.

No matter the reason, Ellen now knew she would always find some excuse to flee.

"But, you know,"

"When I actually tried it…"

"It seems… strange."

"No matter how much I think about it, tying you up like this, imprisoning you, confining you."

"It shouldn't be like this."

"So… I created this place, and watched you living here…"

"But when it comes to this,"

"With you trapped before my eyes, in a place like this,"

"Seeing you unable to sleep properly, and constantly sobbing,"

"I think this is not right."

"It shouldn't be this way."

"In the end, this will only hurt you more."

The Demon King released Ellen's chin.

Hadn't she been suffering since being put in this environment?

He shouldn't accept this.

Although she knew she couldn't escape, she was just numb.

All she did was suffer.

She engaged in another self-deprecation.

A foolish self-deprecation that she didn't deserve happiness.

Although she would resign herself to being trapped and accept it,

It was clear that she would eventually fall ill.

The Demon King silently watched Ellen as she cried.

If he confined her, he could keep Ellen in this place forever.

However, Ellen would fall ill while huddled up, unable to forgive or accept herself.

This could be a lesser evil, but it could never be a better option.

It was nothing more than a story of caging a bird in a cage, taking it out and touching it whenever needed.

Thus, the Demon King couldn't help but come to the conclusion that this wasn't right as he observed the reality that had become as he imagined.

"After the destruction of Darkland and the death of the previous Demon King, I couldn't live as a demon since arriving in the Imperial Capital."

"There were limits to disguising myself with magic."

"Living as a demon was impossible."

"To live among humans, I needed a human form, and that's the Reinhardt you know."

"So."

-Shwoosh

On the shore where waves crashed,

In a prison named an island made for only one person,

The Demon King carefully removed something from his left ring finger.

Despite her tears, Ellen stared blankly at his actions.

"The ring that allowed me to live while blending in with the world is the most important item that made all of this possible."

The ring.

Ellen had never known that Reinhardt wore such a ring.

Since it was a ring for disguise, even its shape could be concealed.

Reinhardt, who had returned to his Demon King form, quietly grasped Ellen's left hand.

"I've created a world where I can live as a demon, so I don't need it anymore."

"As you know, you can't live anywhere in that form."

"It's not right for someone who looks exactly like the deceased hero to roam the world."

"Now that I can live as I am,"

"You can't live as yourself anymore."

"So, I'll give it to you."

"From now on, you'll need it more than I do."

"And I'll send you back."

The Demon King carefully slid the ring onto Ellen's left ring finger.

The ring, which seemed a bit too large at first, fit perfectly on Ellen's finger.

Ellen stared blankly at the Demon King, trembling as she asked, "What is… this?"

"This is the object that allowed me to become Reinhardt and even a cat."

"…”

The ring of Dreadfiend.

As the last Archdemon, this ring had made everything possible.

But now, it was no longer needed.

So, it was given to someone who could not live in the world without it.

Having intended to keep her imprisoned for the rest of her life, the Demon King finally admitted that it was a mistake.

"It's a good thing for me too."

"Having someone like you rot away in a place like this is, in a way, a subtle loss."

"Like this time, informing me of vital information. You'll do something else. Something in your own way."

"It'll be good for both you and me."

"I won't hold you back."

"So."

"You're free."

He granted her complete freedom, the opposite of imprisonment.

He ultimately chose to let go of the opportunity to keep her captive forever.

"With this, people won't know that you're Ellen Artorius, and you won't have to keep seeking places with no one around. You can just blend in with the world as an ordinary person, living as if nothing ever happened."

If she lived as someone else, Ellen would truly disappear from the world.

She could stroll through cities as an ordinary person, gain a new identity, and live a completely new life.

"Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Ellen stared blankly at the mysterious ring on her finger.

"If you leave here and want to get away from me, if you want to hide, I'll never be able to find you. If you decide to run away, I won't be able to see you for the rest of my life."

The Demon King, who had found the hero, gave her the means to escape from him forever.

If Ellen decided to hide, the Demon King would never be able to find the hero again.

"But at the same time, it's also an object that allows you to find me whenever you

want."

It was an object that allowed her to escape forever.

But used differently, it could also be an object that allowed her to meet Reinhardt whenever she wanted.

As Ellen Artorius, it would have been impossible for her to wander the world, but with the power of the ring, it was possible.

Whether she used it as an escape route for eternal running away, or as a key to a meeting she could always have, it was entirely up to Ellen.

The Demon King gently held the tip of the hero's left finger, which had lost its color.

"So…”

"Instead of confining you in a place like this."

"And not forcing anything else on you."

"I'll give you complete freedom to go where you want, and do what you want."

"Just one favor."

"Once every few months."

"Or once every few years."

"That's fine."

"Sometimes."

"Really, just sometimes."

"Come to see me."

"That's enough."

"That's enough… that's all I need."

"I won't ask for more."

"It's not like you and I absolutely have to do something incredible together."

"Like practicing swordsmanship like now."

"Or making something to eat."

"Or just gathering everyone and chatting like before, talking about nothing in particular."

"Even just doing those simple, trivial things would be fine."

"Sometimes, we can be together, right?"

"There's no longer any desperate reason not to."

"You know it too."

"You know how strange it is."

"I only ask for that much from you."

"So, at least allow yourself that much."

"So…"

"Let's stop our mutual torment and self-flagellation… now."

At those words, the tears that had barely stopped began to flow again.

"Ugh… uhu… hic! Sob!"

That was all he asked for.

It wasn't too much to ask.

"It's not such a difficult request, is it?"

The Demon King gritted his teeth too.

He too held back his anger and passion.

With teary eyes, he met Ellen's gaze, both of them straining to see each other.

"So… will you do it?"

After finally capturing the hero, he locked her up and then set her free again.

He gave her the gift of living freely.

He would give her the means to leave forever.

He pleaded for her not to leave forever.

Instead of holding her, he let her go.

They made just one promise.

A thread that may not be thick or strong, but wouldn't break.

They connected a single thread between them.

If facing each other was too difficult and guilt-ridden, they didn't always have to.

But sometimes, they would meet.

Could they not at least allow themselves that much?

To not even allow that much would be too cruel to both of them.

They didn't need to be that cruel.

It was over now.

Couldn't they allow themselves that much?

That's what the Demon King said.

Knowing that if he forcefully embraced her, she would die in his arms, he created an environment where she could live fully in the world.

He sent her back to the world.

As she had been doing until now, let her live by doing things only she could do.

She could find her place for whatever reason, to atone for her sins or anything else.

But sometimes, when she was tired or lonely, she could come back and rest.

At least allow that much.

If she wanted to live with eternal punishment, she could.

But moments of atonement would never come.

So she could at least allow herself that tiny respite.

In front of the Demon King, who had finally chosen to let go despite wanting to hold onto her, she could no longer force herself.

With gratitude and appreciation in her heart.

She had to answer.

So, Ellen tried her best to turn her grimace, which had been unbearable up until now, into a smile.

"Ugh… uhm… yes…"

And in the end, her tears and laughter mixed together, leaving her with an even more disheveled expression.

On the beach, where waves crashed and broke eternally.

On a beach where waves would roll in and shatter forever.

They promised another eternity.

And so.

The hero.

"I will… I will…”

With the Demon King.

Although thin.

An unbreakable bond.

"I will do it."

They shared a tiny, eternal covenant.

CHAPTER 696

Epilogue - Beyond Civilization

At the farthest northern tip of the continent.

Even further to the west of that remote place.

There was an unnamed snowy region that lay beyond a vast mountain range, where no one had lived even before the Gate incident occurred.

A polar region where no other season existed but winter.

"Hey…! Over here!"

At the sound of the shout somewhere in the blizzard-swept plateau, a group of people hurried towards it.

The six tall men soon discovered a fallen beast and the person guarding it in the midst of the blizzard.

"Phew, this is quite a catch. I haven't seen one this big in three years."

A massive reindeer lay collapsed, an arrow lodged precisely in its forehead.

"Let's tie it up quickly. If the snow keeps piling up, we might be stuck in the shelter for days."

Everyone began tying ropes around the dead reindeer's body. If the blizzard worsened, they might not be able to return and would have to spend days in the cabin.

"Even if we're stuck, our friend Betton here will have to go back, even if the snow is taller than him."

"Of course. I'll go back even if there's an avalanche today."

At someone's remark, the others began chuckling and laughing.

"If you don't want to see Betton frozen to death without even knowing what happened to his child, let's move quickly!"

The man called Betton smiled at the joke and began tying ropes around the reindeer's body so that everyone could pull it along.

All of them were dressed in thick clothing and each carried a bow.

The man who appeared to be the leader of the group playfully patted the back of a blonde man who was tying ropes with him.

He was the man who had discovered the reindeer and shot it with an arrow.

"Anyway, Radeus, you're a real master archer."

"Haha… You're too kind."

"It's beyond that, really. You kill the reindeer with a single arrow, and none of us could even see it because of the snow. Honestly, we thought you were just shooting randomly and talking nonsense."

No one in the group had even seen the reindeer.

However, Radeus had aimed his bow somewhere in the blizzard, shot an arrow, and then walked confidently towards his target.

At the scene, a reindeer lay collapsed.

He had an uncanny ability to find prey, and his arrows always struck vital spots.

"He's a nobleman, a real nobleman."

All the hunters nodded in agreement with the leader's words. Betton, whose wife had begun giving birth, thanked Radeus several times.

They tied up the reindeer's carcass, and everyone began leading it back.

"By the way, Radeus. Hasn't it been a long time for you as well?"

"What do you mean…?"

"I mean having a child."

"Ah…"

"Betton is becoming a father today, but you still haven't had any luck, right?"

As one person began to tease him, others chimed in.

There was a right time for such things, and it could be getting late.

It might be fine for his wife, but wouldn't it be difficult for him as he got older?

They said it was always best to prepare for anything before one's strength began to wane.

Radeus, the young man in question, could only offer an awkward smile.

"By the way, Violet said she's going to help with the birth today, right?"

"I don't know much about it, but she said she'd help as much as she could…"

"Hehe…"

Radeus's wife had volunteered to help Betton's wife with her childbirth that day.

However, the man seemed to be in a difficult situation upon hearing the offer.

"…Is there a problem?"

"It's not an ordinary task for delicate people like your wife…"

-Thump thump

Another man patted Radeus' shoulder.

"She must be terrified."

"…?"

"Fortunately, you are a steadfast man. How could you bring such a frail wife to a place like this?"

Upon hearing that, Radeus forced an awkward smile with a mixture of irritation.

"Ahaha… I must have pushed her a bit too hard…"

Every time Radeus heard that, he felt as if a lump had lodged itself in his throat.

A place where people didn't live even during the era of a thriving civilization.

A remote area, so far removed from civilization that there were no warp gates, and even the monsters of the gates couldn't easily enter.

The fallen emperor Bertus and Saviolin Turner lived under new names, beyond the reach of civilization.

Therefore, whenever Bertus heard that Saviolin Turner, who was pretending to be his wife, was a delicate woman, he couldn't help but feel an indescribable, bizarre emotion.

The village in the snowy wasteland wasn't that small.

Considering the extreme environment it was situated in, a community of just over three hundred households was quite large.

One thousand kilometers in all directions was uninhabited land, and beyond the massive mountain range to the north lay a frozen sea that stretched as far as the eye could see.

Bertus and Turner had deliberately come to this place.

They hadn't initially intended to seek out such an environment.

It was impossible to hide in any place where civilization existed. No matter where they went, they were always pursued.

Occasionally, they were discovered by adventurers in the poorly hidden deep

wilderness.

Although they had fled to survive, they didn't want to kill anyone.

So they decided to go to a place where the very foundation of civilization couldn't exist.

The deep wilderness that even monsters didn't seek.

A place where it was difficult for humans, beasts, and monsters alike to survive.

Believing that they could hide their bodies there forever.

Bertus and Turner crossed over to the far side of civilization.

And they reached a place where someone was living in an environment that no human should be able to survive.

To the strangers who appeared in an environment where no outsider could come, everyone in the village was kind and warm-hearted.

They were astonished at how Bertus and Turner had arrived, but still took care of them.

They provided them with a place to sleep, clothes to wear, and food to eat.

No one asked them why they had come.

To these people, the world was nothing but a snow-covered wasteland.

There were no countries, history, or nations.

They only knew that strangely-shaped beasts had begun to appear at some point.

The small but resilient civilization of the snowfield was solid even in the face of the occasional monsters.

To them, monsters were treated as "inedible things" or "things that looked like they would cause trouble if eaten."

Thus, Turner and Bertus encountered a very small community that shouldn't have existed in a place devoid of civilization, and they settled down there haphazardly.

A harsh but endearing place, cold but not lonely.

A place so far removed from the world that nobody knew about it.

Bertus learned a lot.

How to live and survive in the snowfield.

When isolated in the snow, one had to know what to do.

How to find the beasts that managed to survive even in this harsh environment.

The locations of temporary shacks hidden for the hunters.

He had transformed hunting, which had once been a mere hobby, into a genuine skill for making a living.

"Phew… it was worth moving quickly. We've already arrived."

The group, led by a reindeer hunted by Bertus, arrived at the village on the snowy plateau.

Of course, one didn't go hunting on a snowy day.

The village hunters went out because of the insistent requests that Betton, whose wife was about to give birth, should throw a feast.

"Ellaaaaaaaaaa!"

As soon as he returned, Betton rushed home, screaming his wife's name.

Leaving his wife in labor to go hunting, his worry must have been immense.

"Radeus, will you try this time?"

Bertus knew what the leader of the hunters meant.

Butchering.

It was something Bertus still couldn't get used to, so the leader tried to make him do it whenever the opportunity arose.

At some point, the leader's ultimate goal became turning the outsider Bertus into a perfect tundra man.

"Ah, no, I'll leave it to those who've been doing it."

"Tsk. You're good at everything else, but you just can't seem to get the hang of this."

"I'm… sorry."

He had good manual skills, a keen eye, and quick actions.

He was almost perfect, but he just couldn't do tasks like butchering or skinning.

A man who was almost perfect but always lacking in something crucial.

To the tundra men, Radeus was an unbelievably talented man, but always lacking in strange ways.

"Haha, I thought we'd see Radeus turn pale today, but it's a shame."

One of the men holding the rope behind the leader chuckled.

Hahaha!

"…"

In truth, he didn't avoid it because he didn't want to do it, but because he tried several times and couldn't.

The first time the leader entrusted him with butchering, Bertus, who didn't know any better, grabbed the knife and rushed in, only to see a gruesome sight.

Upon seeing the blood spilling out with the innards, Bertus ran out of the butchering area and vomited.

He could handle seeing disgusting things, but something so filthy was unbearable for Bertus.

Rather, the villagers looked at Bertus and laughed, thinking what a strange man he was.

After vomiting, the rumor spread throughout the village.

The newcomer had a peculiar constitution that made him vomit at the sight of blood.

Of course, that misunderstanding was now gone, but there were still some things Bertus couldn't do.

Bertus now knew.

In this kind of life, there was no need for one specific overwhelming strength.

It wasn't enough to be good at hunting or tracking.

One had to be capable of everything.

From hunting to butchering, cooking, starting fires, and even gathering firewood in this extreme environment, there was no end to what one had to learn.

That's why, initially, he was treated like someone who didn't know anything.

Now, Bertus realized he had much to learn from everyone in the village, including men, women, and especially the elderly.

Somehow, by capitalizing on his strengths and having others resolve his weaknesses, he was able to accomplish the tasks at hand.

"Anyway, Betton has gone ahead, but you should hurry as well."

"Yes."

Bertus also headed in the direction of Betton's house, where Betton had rushed off.

-Thump

Then, the door to Betton's house opened, and someone came out.

It was Saviolin Turner.

In this place, she was known by the name Violet, and she staggered out of the house.

Her short hair, which had always been just long enough to reach her neck, had grown past her waist and had to be tied with a hairband.

As people said,

She now looked just like a frail woman at first glance.

"…?"

-Plunk

And then, Bertus saw Saviolin Turner, whose face had turned pale as if her soul had been drained, stagger and collapse onto the snowy ground.

It was a delicate and fragile appearance that didn't suit the well-known Saviolin Turner at all.

-Ah…

-Ah-ah…

Had something terrible happened?

"Vi- Violet…?"

Bertus hastily approached the collapsed Turner.

Turner looked up at Bertus blankly.

Her face was pale beyond white, turning a shade of blue.

"Ah, ah… ah…"

"Wh- What happened?"

"Ah, ah… no."

-Eugh-ugh-eugh! Ugh!

Behind the trembling Turner, the groans of a woman in the throes of childbirth could be heard from Betton's house.

-Thump

The door to Betton's house opened cautiously, and the midwife poked her head out.

"It's nothing serious. She's just in shock. Take her home, give her some warm water to drink, and lay her down."

"Yes…?"

The old woman closed the door after leaving those words.

Only then did Bertus notice Saviolin Turner's pupils shaking violently.

What had she seen?

"Th- That… Vi- Violet… the baby… th- that… ha, ha-ha… ha-ha… ho- how… how… how? Huh? Huh?"

She seemed to be trying to explain something but was just trembling, unable to articulate it.

Nothing was wrong.

But it was clear she had seen something incredibly shocking.

Only then did Bertus understand why the other hunters had been more concerned about Violet than Betton's wife, who was giving birth.

It was because they knew that witnessing the process of childbirth would leave her in a daze.

Just as Bertus had no resistance to blood, Turner had no resistance to certain things.

In this place, the hunters were convinced that Violet, who had a somewhat naive image, would surely be like that.

"I am… useless again…”

In the end, looking at Turner with her head hung low, shivering, Bertus gave a bitter smile.

"Let's go home first."

"Yes…”

Supporting the trembling Saviolin Turner, Bertus headed for their home.

Bertus sat Turner down on the bed and handed her a cup of warm water.

He smiled as he watched her sipping the water that wasn't too hot.

Not long after Turner and Bertus arrived, the villagers built a house on their own.

Despite the scarcity of resources, the people worked diligently to gather materials and quickly constructed a house.

Then, they pushed the couple inside, telling them to live there.

They had never said that they would settle down or even explained why they had come here.

Yet, as if everyone already knew without being told, they built a house for them without asking any questions.

So, Turner and Bertus had no choice but to awkwardly settle down.

After that, Bertus tried to help out with various things in the village, only to realize how much he lacked. And what he didn't know, he learned.

But in Turner's case, it was worse.

She didn't know how to cook, let alone how to handle meat.

She couldn't sew or work with leather.

She didn't even know how to start a fire.

Of course, she had absolutely no idea how to make preserved food, which was most important in such an environment.

She couldn't even play with the children.

With a troubled smile, she didn't know what to do in front of the children.

Even when given menial tasks around the village, she would look tearful, not knowing what to do or how to do it.

A beautiful woman with a gentle disposition and demure manners, but utterly useless.

Still, people found her adorable and felt a strange sense of satisfaction watching her perplexed expressions. She was an amusing woman to observe.

The village women secretly envied her hands, which were excessively fair, clean, and soft, as if she had never experienced hardship.

She was confident in her ability to do physical labor, but everyone, young and old, discouraged Turner from trying.

Because it was clear that someone so delicate would certainly get hurt if they tried to do strenuous work.

So, even when she wanted to do what she was good at, they never gave her the opportunity.

Due to the accumulated perception, when she said she wanted to be a hunter, people laughed.

Everyone waved their hands, telling her not to joke around.

In truth, it was only natural.

She had spent her entire life holding a sword.

Her daily life and everything else had been provided by the imperial court.

Everything other than the sword had been taken care of, and it had never been her concern.

That's why Turner didn't know anything outside of the sword and had no practical skills.

She had spent her life doing only what she was good at and had become a person completed by that.

It was fortunate that she didn't cry out in confusion when suddenly asked to do work in an unrelated field.

Even when shown a task, she still asked, "What is this?"

The same was true even for tasks she had been taught once.

Despite being taught, she just couldn't do them well.

Turner was much more incompetent than Bertus, who had been the emperor.

That was the reality for Saviolin Turner, who had once been the empire's strongest knight and the continent's greatest swordsman.

"Have you calmed down a bit?"

"Yes……”

This time, facing the major event of childbirth in the village, she had tried to run errands, but after being told to go back and rest by the midwife, she had come outside and sat down hesitantly.

She had seen countless deaths and killings and had witnessed innumerable gruesome scenes.

But there was no way she could have ever experienced the spectacle of a new life being born and the shock it brought.

How?

How could it be like this?

It was a relief that she didn't faint with her head full of question marks and exclamation points.

Bertus didn't say anything as he watched Turner, who was trying to catch her breath, fiddling with a cup of water.

Bertus knew better than anyone how much she agonized, realizing how incompetent she was.

Bertus smiled faintly as he looked at Turner.

"It's not easy."

“…Yes, it isn't."

The villagers always laughed, finding the couple adorable as they addressed each other with respect, even though they were married.

No one asked why they were so formal with each other.

No one questioned if they were a real couple.

At least Bertus was doing his part now, and his hunting skills greatly benefited the village.

However, Saviolin Turner still didn't know how to do anything, and to people, she was just a fragile and naive woman.

Yet, no one excessively criticized Turner's incompetence.

Although some teased her playfully, no villager seriously scolded her.

That was because everyone had seen them on the day they arrived in the village.

Piercing through the harsh snowstorm, barely distinguishable as human or snow, they were on the verge of collapsing.

Everyone remembered Saviolin Turner's determined expression as she gritted her teeth, eyes wide open, carrying the unconscious Bertus when they arrived.

When asked how they had come this far, Turner had said that she had thought there was a village here.

She had heard the sounds of people living.

However, she had walked for more than ten days after hearing those sounds.

She had heard the inaudible sounds and found her way through the snowstorm to this village.

That's why everyone said it.

She was naive.

She didn't know how to do anything.

She caused accidents no matter what she did.

But she was a great person.

That's why no one could ignore Saviolin Turner.

CHAPTER 697

"Honestly, it's fun."

"Fun, you say?"

At Bertus' words, Turner tilted her head.

"Seeing you like this."

"Ah…"

"I've never been treated this way in my life."

"That's true… but…"

The emotions Turner felt in this village were unlike anything she had experienced in her life.

She had always been a person mentioned in the lower ranks of the emperor wherever she went.

Moreover, her position was not earned through blood ties or anything else, but through her own skills.

That's why she was the farthest from incompetence.

Even if there were mistakes in the orders she received, there were never any mistakes in her execution.

In fact, she had perfectly executed the impossible orders of the last emperor.

Her life had been without failure.

But ever since she arrived in this snowy village, she had become a person who failed at everything she did.

Now, even the four-year-old children in the neighborhood would offer to help her when she carried a heavy burden.

Turner sighed.

"Ah… I think the people in this village are more capable, wise, and versatile than anyone I've ever seen."

"I feel the same way."

Sustaining life through one's own power.

Those who had once managed the world marveled at the cooperation, self-sufficiency, and survival of a community of just over 300 households in this extreme environment.

Each villager knew what they had to do and did it.

Someone always had to be able to take on someone else's role.

That's why everyone had to know how to do everything.

Previously, all Turner had to do was wield a sword.

That's why she became fatally incompetent in this small community.

"If only monsters appeared more frequently, I would have something to do, but that's not the case. Although it's strange to hope for such a thing…"

"It's a good thing."

"Yes…"

In reality, monsters were very rare in this remote area.

The occasional monster found would be buried in nature as a corpse, or hunted by the village's hunters if discovered.

In any case, others knew how to exert effort, and there was no need to stand out.

To the children, she was a pretty aunt.

To the women, she was a naive and innocent neighbor.

To the elderly, she was a cute and clumsy young wife.

That was Turner's reality.

"Still, it's hard to bear being treated like a child by children much younger than me. Of course, the hardest part is having nothing to say."

In fact, Turner had lived longer than the oldest person in the village.

Everyone was like a child to her, but she was treated like a child who didn't know anything by those children.

And in reality, she didn't know anything.

Because of this discrepancy, Turner's days were filled with sighs.

Holding a cup of cooling water, Turner looked out at the falling snow.

"Still… I'm grateful that a place like this exists."

She had tried to avoid people's eyes by living in the extreme wilderness.

But still, she lived among people.

And she could continue to live.

Turner said so with a smile, and Bertus also smiled.

The snowy plains.

A nameless village.

‘A boy, you say?’

‘Oh, that's right!’

News of a new life had just begun to spread in that place.

A healthy baby boy was born, and the mother was well.

Betton, in anticipation of his wife's childbirth, had insisted that the hunters go hunting even though it was snowing, all for the sake of holding a feast once the birth had been safely completed.

Of course, neither the new mother and child nor Betton, who had been by their side, could attend the feast.

At the village's central meeting hall, various meat dishes made from the reindeer that Bertus had hunted were prepared, as well as an array of other dishes to celebrate the village's joyous occasion.

It was only natural that Turner and Bertus attended the feast.

‘It should have been a daughter, you know.’

‘Why does it have to be a daughter?’

‘If it's a son, won't he be just like that reckless Betton? Wouldn't it be better if it's a daughter resembling gentle Ella?’

‘They say daughters take after their fathers, so wouldn't she be a reckless daughter like Betton?’

‘Oh dear, that would be quite troublesome then.’

‘Hahaha!’

People were chattering about the birth of the new life in various ways.

Drinking fermented deer's milk, they shared different stories with each other.

Though not abundant, it wasn't extremely scarce either.

It wasn't a situation where a single feast would deplete their resources, as there

were many skilled hunters in the village.

So, on a happy day like this, they could eat and drink as much as they wanted.

Bertus and Turner, being used to rough food, could eat without any burden.

However, Turner's expression was not great.

It was because, on such a day, she would inevitably hear a certain question.

"So, what's the plan for your little one?"

"Uh…?"

Today's midwife, an elderly woman, approached Violet with a kind smile and asked.

If there was something to ask about their plans on a day like this, it must be about a child.

When would you have one? That was the question.

Naturally, Turner's face turned pale.

"Don't be scared because of what you saw today. We've all been through it. It's not a frightening thing. It's a magnificent and sacred event."

"Ah…"

Turner was older than the elderly woman.

When a younger elder asked her when she was planning to have a baby, Turner could not help but feel as if she was going mad.

Turner hesitated and opened her mouth.

"Well, we're… trying our best…"

Of course, they hadn't even tried yet.

"Hehe… You two seem like a perfect couple with no problems. Why won't the child

come…?"

The elder squinted her eyes and turned to look at Bertus.

"Are you a sterile pretty boy?"

"What?!"

A pretty boy with no substance.

"No! No, we're not! He's… He's fine! He's healthy! Plenty! Every, every day! A lot!"

In the end, Turner, who was annoyed, yelled with her face turning red.

Her nature was to be more upset about Bertus's story than her own.

But once she yelled, she realized what she had said and her face turned pale.

What did she mean by plenty?

"What do you mean by every day…? Uh, incredible…"

What did she mean by every day and what was incredible about it?

"Sit down, honey."

Turner, who had unknowingly stood up, sat down as if collapsing when Bertus cautiously pulled her back to her seat.

"Hehe… It seems like this side has more energy…"

Of course, the elderly laughed, as did the others seated at the table. After all, it was amusing to tease this naive and pretty young bride.

She knew nothing and always seemed bewildered. What was the harm in that?

In this frozen village, she always responded like a flapping fish, no matter the topic of conversation.

The mischievous elderly women found one of their greatest joys in life teasing this

young bride. Her husband was also amusing, but he was such a well-mannered gentleman that he always responded courteously, no matter what prank was pulled.

In a way, he was the model student.

He understood and remembered everything he was taught, executed tasks perfectly, and was serious in all matters.

He was useful but not fun.

In contrast, his wife was clumsy and always tried her best but failed, making her perpetually distressed and uneasy.

She was not useful, but she was fun.

In their own ways, both had become indispensable to the village.

"How strong is he on a daily basis?"

"That friend may seem weak, but he's quite the fighter. He once went out alone and carried back an entire bear! Catching it is one thing, but carrying it back requires what kind of strength?"

"Strong bones?"

"Well, of course."

"Then, his back?"

"Right. His back is extraordinary."

"Heh… I never thought of him that way…”

"Appearances can be deceiving."

Whispers and jokes filled the air, and Turner's face turned increasingly red. The polite Bertus's hand holding his glass trembled as well.

"I, I'm sorry, honey…”

"It's alright…”

The fact that they cherished each other so much had already been proven by how far they had come together.

However, the sight of them addressing each other so formally made onlookers feel peculiar.

It was as if they were a young couple dating rather than married.

Everyone had their opinions, but ultimately, they were a pleasant sight. That's what everyone thought.

The feast continued.

Bertus soon saw the village chief, who had been sitting at the head of the table, having a conversation with someone who had entered the hall.

The nameless village chief was also the leader of the hunters.

He had directed the group that had gone to catch a reindeer just a while ago.

After a brief conversation, the village chief left the hall.

Although it was a normal occurrence, the chief's expression was slightly unusual, causing Bertus to watch the scene intently.

"…”

"…”

It seemed that Bertus wasn't the only one noticing, as Turner's eyes met his with the same concern.

It was a matter they didn't quite understand.

Bertus shrugged his shoulders slightly, and Turner smiled softly.

The feast continued.

After a while, Betton appeared at the hall, saying that his wife had fallen asleep.

As the star of the event, he received many congratulations before sitting down next to Bertus.

"Brother Radeus."

"Yes, Betton?"

"Could you speak more casually…?"

"I'm comfortable like this. Congratulations on having a baby boy."

At Bertus's congratulatory words, Betton scratched his head.

Both Betton and his wife, Ella, were much younger than Bertus.

But because of that, Bertus learned more about the village's affairs from Betton than from the older villagers.

Bertus had always been grateful to Betton.

"Yes, he's healthy. We were worried for a while, but Ella seems to be doing well too… By the way, is your wife alright?"

At that, Turner's face turned red.

"Huh? Oh… Yes, I'm sorry."

Ella must have been worried enough to suggest going to see her helper.

"Please, convey my apologies…"

The person assisting with the birth was trembling in fear more than the one giving birth, so the midwife had to send the helper away to rest.

"Anyway, brother."

"Yes, Betton."

"Our child doesn't have a name yet."

With a serious expression, Betton asked Bertus.

"Could you give our child a name?"

At that question, Bertus couldn't help but be taken aback.

"Me? Name the child?"

"Yes, I'd really like it if you could name our child. Normally, the village chief would do it, but when I asked, he said it would be fine…"

It was an absurd request for both Bertus and Turner, who overheard it.

Neither of them had ever imagined they would be asked to name someone's child. Besides, they were still practically newcomers to the village.

Could they really take on the significant task of naming a child who would become a village resident?

Although they had already received permission from the village chief, they couldn't help but be flustered.

"I feel something from you, brother."

"What is it…?"

"Well… I can't quite put it into words, but you seem different from people like me. If you were to name my child, I feel his future would be bright…"

Bertus thought he understood why Betton was saying such things.

A fundamentally different person.

The atmosphere that couldn't be clearly defined by their speech or behavior.

Although Bertus thought he understood what Betton was saying, he still hesitated.

Naming someone's child.

It may seem like a trivial task, but it determines someone's life.

Did he deserve such responsibility?

Could he, who had abandoned everything and fled, take on such a task?

As he struggled with these thoughts, unknown to others.

-Swoosh

A thick hand landed on Bertus' shoulder.

"Just do it."

"Ah… Chief."

The leader of the hunters and village chief.

With a smile, he had placed his hand on Bertus' shoulder, though Bertus didn't know when he had returned.

"In a village where nothing is new, what could be more special than receiving a name from a newcomer?"

Since the chief was even suggesting it, refusing without a clear reason would ultimately be disrespectful to the newborn and their new home.

"Yes, I'll think about it."

"Thank you, brother!"

Naming someone's child was not a decision to be made lightly, so some thought was necessary.

However, even after promising to consider a name, the chief's hand did not withdraw.

"Also, come outside for a moment."

"Yes? Ah… Yes."

"Violet, could you come outside for a moment as well?"

“…Ah, yes."

Did he have something to say?

Following the chief out of the gathering hall, he walked ahead with his back turned, then stopped and spoke quietly.

"Someone is looking for you two."

At that plain statement, both Bertus and Turner couldn't help but feel their entire bodies freeze.

How on earth?

Who had come?

Had pursuers penetrated this remote area and come all the way here?

What should they do then?

Although the chief had said it as if it wasn't a big deal, this was no ordinary matter.

As Turner and Bertus arrived at this nameless village in the snowfield, it was as if a great event had taken place. Just as they had made their way here, it was by no means an easy task for the guest who sought them to reach this place.

"If you need help, let me know. I'll be watching."

It seemed that the village chief knew it was no ordinary matter, and so he spoke.

It couldn't be helped.

Anyone who had come this far must know that the person they sought and the person searching for them were not ordinary people.

Could they be of any help?

If neither of them could handle the person who came searching, then no one's help

would be of any use.

While Bertus was one thing, Turner was treated as less than half a penny here.

However, the two of them had spent a long time in this nameless village.

Because of that, even though they didn't know if it would actually be helpful or not, they had already trusted the enormous back of the village chief, who was also the head hunter.

They trusted him without even knowing why.

Just as he had taught them hunting, slaughtering, finding their way in the snowfield, and the ways to survive.

It seemed like he would show them the way in this uncertain situation as well.

Both Turner and Bertus found themselves already trusting the village chief without reason or basis.

So the village chief, Turner, and Bertus left the meeting hall together.

On a snowy night, the entire village was quiet, save for the bustling sounds coming from the meeting hall, as all the villagers were inside.

They followed the village chief as he walked towards the outskirts of the village.

At the place they reached after clearing the piled snow, there were two people wearing black robes.

Two black robes covered in a light layer of snow, perhaps from the falling snowflakes.

"Let's have a talk."

After leaving those words, the village chief turned around and communicated with his eyes alone.

If they needed help, he would provide it in some way or another.

The fact that they were waiting like this, rather than ambushing them, meant that they didn't want to harm the village or had some other purpose.

The two people in the snowstorm, wearing black robes.

The person on the right cautiously removed their hood.

"…!"

"You, you are…?"

Both Bertus and Turner were shocked.

Long, black hair like darkness itself.

And a pale face.

"It's been a while."

"Anna…?"

The disappeared dark mage, Anna de Gerna, was there.

The person on the left also removed their hood.

"Louis…"

The person on the left was none other than Louis Ancton, who had disappeared along with Anna.

The remnants of the long-lost Gardias Empire and its lost civilization reunited on a plateau where civilization had vanished after five years.

CHAPTER 698

Anna and Louis had arrived at a place that could not be found.

Their connection had ended when the Gardias Empire disappeared.

Although former Emperor Bertus was wanted, Anna and Louis were different.

All information about individuals related to the Immortals had been buried beneath the surface. Hence, Anna and Louis were not wanted.

However, it seemed as if they too had vanished from the world.

Anna’s promise to Bertus had been to kill Christina.

They had not spoken of anything beyond that.

Bertus had wanted to die but could not.

After Anna and Louis disappeared, time passed before they finally found Bertus and Turner hiding in the wilderness.

But their reunion could not be simply joyous.

Just as a long time had changed Bertus and Turner, they could not know how Anna and Louis had been changed.

And they didn't know how they had found their way to such a remote place.

Thus, both Turner and Bertus kept their distance, tensely.

Neither Anna nor Louis approached carelessly, as if they knew of the other's wariness.

However, Anna's expression was calm.

No anger, hatred, or sadness was visible.

Her intentions were completely unknown.

"I won't talk for long. I've been gathering the scattered Shanafel and the royal mages of the Gardias Empire."

Shanafel and the royal mages.

The Emperor had disbanded them just before the empire disappeared.

Their fate after the final battle in Diane was left to them.

None of them had joined the new Demon King's Empire.

They couldn't have joined in the first place. As the responsibility of the royal family was also theirs, the Demon King could not take them in.

The maximum power of the Gardias royal family was, of course, a group that should have been completely liquidated along with their empire.

So, the Shanafel and the royal mages scattered after the battle in Diane.

Some would have found their own paths, while others would have hidden their past and lived somewhere.

Like Bertus and Turner, living as fugitives.

Some of them, after a long time, had even entrusted themselves to the new empire.

And some had entrusted themselves to the human autonomous region, which was anti-Demon King.

The scattered remnants of the past went their separate ways.

However, most of the Shanafel and the royal mages had gone into hiding.

Anna said she was now uniting the scattered royal mages and Shanafel.

"Why are you doing that?"

Anna silently looked at Bertus in response to his cautious question.

"I'm creating an organization."

"What…?"

"Like the Black Order or Cantus Magna. I'm trying to create something like that. No… It's already been created."

Bertus could not help but widen his eyes.

After the empire disappeared, Anna had gathered the scattered Shanafel and royal mages.

She had gathered the group disbanded by the Emperor.

And it had already become an organization that could be called a union.

"Why are you creating that? What do you want to do?"

"Well,"

Anna looked at the snowy wilderness on a snowy night.

"The people who couldn't join the new empire are scattered."

"People who have too much to do to just live in hiding, they're just holding their breath scattered. That, in itself, is a loss to humanity… No, to people."

"Among those people, some were waiting for death in the hopeless, futureless autonomous region, which was a meaningless act."

"Rather than achieving things individually, there would be more to accomplish together."

"For now, we've gathered."

"There must be plenty to do."

"We may be able to eliminate monsters lurking in places untouched by human hands."

"Just like the Black Order did, we might be able to achieve things the new empire cannot from the shadows."

"However, in most situations, we will become bystanders if the task isn't necessary for everyone."

"In our generation, there's a high probability that we will only form this alliance and pass our work onto the next generation."

"It would be best if we don't end up doing anything."

"But just in case, somewhere, at some moment."

"We might be needed, so we've gathered people."

"That's all there is to it."

"I don't want to hear whether this is right or not."

"This was the best I could do."

"Just like you did your best, that's all we can do."

Powerful individuals were stronger together than apart.

That's why, although there was no specific purpose for their power, it was a waste for them to live scattered and separate.

Anna gathered them.

The Black Order was gone.

But a new Black Order was created.

The knights and mages of the vanished empire became a secret alliance for the new empire.

Right or wrong, that was irrelevant.

Just as Bertus had fled.

Anna had done something.

Bertus might have been bewildered, but he wasn't angry.

The emperor's authority over the Shanafel and the royal wizard corps disappeared when the empire vanished.

Their decision to gather around Anna was their choice.

Now, Bertus was just curious.

"So, why did you come looking for me?"

What reason did they have for seeking the deposed emperor who chose the life of a fugitive?

What did they want from someone who had given up everything?

Bertus couldn't read Anna's expression, but he had an idea of what she would say.

"We lack legitimacy."

“…Legitimacy?"

"Yes, legitimacy."

Anna said calmly.

"Most of the scattered people still follow you. They believe that living quietly under the new empire in accordance with your will is an act of loyalty to a non-existent country."

"Some of them have decided to join us, but many more have rejected the idea of forming a group, believing it goes against your will."

"We know where they are, but there's a significant number who don't want to join us."

It was as he expected.

"If I join you, you'll be able to rally them all, right?"

"Yes, and Lady Turner is here as well."

A new alliance was formed.

But Anna de Gerna lacked legitimacy and qualifications.

There were those who shared their cause, but more refused to join, believing Bertus's final command was silence.

The vanished emperor of the empire.

And the emperor's knights.

If the two joined, they could absorb all those hesitating in joining the alliance in one swoop.

If the Shanafel and the royal mage corps were reassembled, it would be an immense force.

They must already possess a level of power worthy of being called an alliance, but if Bertus joined, someone with both legitimacy and qualifications would be in the alliance, making it easy to gather the scattered individuals.

Gathering the loyalists of a ruined nation was the task of a mere magician of the fallen nation, but the emperor of the fallen nation was on an entirely different level.

"And, I don't think I'm suited for this kind of thing. Neither is Louis."

Anna had created a new power.

But she didn't consider it her own.

"It's not just cooperation I want. It's not that I need you just for appearances."

"…"

"Take on all of this, please."

At those words, Bertus stared at Anna with a stern expression.

"You want me to become… the leader of this sworn group?"

"Yes. We trust your judgment."

"…"

"A lot has gone wrong, but I think you've done your best in your own way. And the fact that it wasn't the worst choice is proven by the world as it is now."

"…"

"Lead us."

Anna hadn't set out to create a sworn group just to wield it herself.

She had created the group to offer it to the emperor of the fallen nation.

For it might be needed someday.

She had gathered people who were too valuable to be buried alive and found someone who could do more than just survive.

Anna's intended role ended there.

Gathering the scattered people.

She had come to entrust the rest of the matter to Bertus.

And she intended to remain as one of the members of the sworn group.

Bertus, quietly and unknowingly, gazed at Turner's face.

Whether it was due to the cold or fear, her complexion was pale.

"…"

In her uneasy expression, Turner cautiously and gently gripped Bertus's fingertips.

No conversation was exchanged.

It was just that the trembling in her fingertips said a lot.

Her desperate expression also said a lot.

Seeing Turner's expression, Bertus smiled faintly.

"Anna… I have no intention of blaming you. I don't have the right to do so."

"…"

"You granted my last request. I'm grateful to you for that."

In the last moment.

Kill a friend.

Bertus had made a cruel request, and Anna had granted it.

It was not a trade.

Bertus had nothing to offer.

"But the thing is, just running away is already cowardly and despicable enough."

Turner had thrown herself into it with her one and only request.

That request was to live.

Seeking personal honor in death is a cowardly act.

But why couldn't he make the truly cowardly and despicable choice?

A fugitive's life began because he couldn't shake off those words.

But that choice was not forced.

In the end, Bertus had chosen it himself.

He had become a coward on his own.

"I abandoned everything and fled, so I can't wear the other crown you've created."

"Leaving aside cowardice and despicableness…"

"It's just petty."

"From the moment I abandoned all responsibility and ran away, I have no right to anything."

"No matter who in the world comes to give me any rights or power, I don't intend to accept it, and I can't accept it."

"The moment I left everything behind, it was already over."

He had discarded his responsibility.

And he had chosen the life of a fugitive.

So, in his life, there can be no rights anymore.

That's fair.

That was Bertus's conclusion for choosing to run away.

"So I have no responsibility, no rights, and no intention of seeking any honor from now on."

"Just surviving."

"Other than that, I have no intention of doing anything."

Bertus tightly gripped Turner's hand, which she was holding gently.

Turner, startled by Bertus's strong grip, flinched.

"I'm sorry, Anna."

"I don't intend to judge whether it's right or wrong, and I don't want any rights or

responsibilities related to it."

"It's irrelevant to my will; you created it."

"So, its rightful owner should be you, not me."

It was unclear whether it was criticism that one shouldn't pass something made with their own hands onto someone else or that even the deed she did should be her own achievement, and therefore, the glory and responsibility should be hers.

Simply, Bertus had no intention of wearing the crown offered to him.

Since she made the nonexistent crown, she should wear it.

At that remark, both Anna and Louis fell silent.

"I thought you'd say that."

Neither criticizing nor attacking, Anna seemed to have known the outcome of this conversation beforehand, and she simply nodded her head.

"But are you satisfied with this?"

Anna pointed to the quiet, snow-covered village, asking if this was his sanctuary.

"It's more than enough."

Bertus replied briefly.

"Let's go back, Louis."

“…Yeah."

Louis Ancton bowed his head towards Bertus and Turner.

Anna turned away without a word.

That was the end of the reunion.

Anna De Gerna became the leader of the new organization.

It might have been Anna's plan to create the organization and entrust its leadership to Bertus.

But Bertus didn't accept it.

Anna would have realized that it was pointless to force it upon an unwilling Bertus.

So, she left quietly.

From then on, Anna had to consider what to do with the new organization.

How to lead them and in what manner.

Somehow managing and resolving internal disagreements and conflicts.

She had to lead them in one way or another.

The guests who visited the village with no reason to receive visitors had quietly left.

Although there was no commotion, Bertus and Turner's expressions were hardened.

Anna and Louis had left.

But someone had already discovered their whereabouts.

So, it was inevitable that others would find out too. It was unknown what the other members would say to Anna and Louis, who returned with this result.

The two had quietly left for now, but they might return later.

And there was no guarantee that they would try to persuade with words like they did now.

"We should leave."

“…Yes, probably."

At Bertus's words, Turner nodded sadly.

They had to leave in order not to harm the village.

There's no place where fugitives can stay forever.

They could only stay for a while, not settle down.

In the end, this remote place was also within someone's reach.

So, they had to leave again for a distant place, not knowing where they were heading.

The only saving grace was that the visitors who came today were not hostile.

For the sake of the kindness this village had shown them so far, the only way to repay it was to disappear as quickly and quietly as possible, ensuring no harm came to them.

On their way back from the outskirts of the village.

In the snow-covered distance, a massive shadow was waiting for Turner and Bertus.

“…Chief."

The village chief, who had promised to help them as much as he could, was waiting for them.

"So, who was the visitor?"

As always, the chief asked with a sly smile.

"An old friend…," Bertus replied.

"A friend, huh? Nice."

The chief laughed heartily.

The sound of the chief's hearty laughter echoed faintly throughout the snow-covered village, and the noise of the bustling crowd at the ongoing feast in a distant hall could be heard.

Leaning back, the chief spoke quietly from a place overlooking the village.

"Do you have a story?"

Bertus was at a loss for words at the chief's sudden question.

During the considerable time they had spent together, neither the chief nor anyone else in the village had ever asked such a question.

“…I can't say there isn't one."

"Yes, I suppose so."

How could someone who had to travel beyond this civilization not have a story?

And yet, even after coming this far, there was a visitor looking for him. How could there not be a story?

The chief put his hand on Bertus's shoulder.

The thick arm of the chief rested on his shoulder, while Turner watched the scene with a slightly anxious expression.

"So."

"…?"

"Does this village not have a story, too?"

For those who had fled beyond civilization, there must have inevitably been a story.

There was no way a village in the far reaches of the world, at the edge of the earth, would be without a story.

"Just as you didn't ask, neither did we."

Bertus and Turner knew the village was strange, but they never asked.

The villagers didn't ask them either.

"We don't know who you are."

"…”

"But you see."

While holding Bertus's shoulder, the chief pointed at the village.

"It's not necessary to know exactly who someone is to be their neighbor."

Bertus and Turner didn't know what the village was about.

But to repay the kindness and goodwill of the villagers, they were planning to leave the village so as not to cause any harm.

It was because they considered them their neighbors.

Even though they didn't know each other, they had become neighbors.

There was a story.

It wasn't necessary to know and understand each other's stories to accept them.

From the moment Turner had carried a faint Bertus across the snow-covered mountains and arrived here.

The villagers had accepted Turner and Bertus as their neighbors without wondering why.

They understood Turner's desperation, her urgency.

"The reason this village can exist is that we know that the colder it gets, the closer we have to stick together to survive."

In the cold, people had to live close to each other to survive.

This was such a community.

"No matter how small this village is, how scarce the food, how harsh the weather…”

The chief smiled.

"We can't turn away a handsome young man and a beautiful old woman whose eyes are suspiciously pretty."

"…!"

-Hahahahaha!

The chief laughed uproariously, and not just Bertus, but Turner's face turned pale as well.

Where on earth was this place?

Who were these people?

Who on earth was the chief?

Although they knew nothing.

In the end.

Just as the chief had never asked anything so far, Bertus never asked anything either.

The chief spoke.

"So, you don't have to leave."

Bertus and Turner felt as if those words were like a promise of divine protection.

“…Yes, Chief."

And so, they could only answer like that.

Turner and Bertus returned home.

Anna and Louis had come to visit.

And they came to realize that the place they had been staying in was an unknown village.

"What is this place?"

Although they had both been curious so far, now the space began to feel mysterious, like some enigma.

"I don't know."

The village chief hadn't told them not to leave.

He said they didn't have to leave.

Somehow, the chief's words without any guarantee reassured both Bertus and Turner that everything would be fine no matter what happened.

The chief promised to continue sheltering them, just as he had done so far.

An opportunity had come, and Bertus had refused it.

Whether that was right or wrong would never be known.

They had chosen the life of a fugitive and had been promised protection by someone.

So, in some unnamed village of this vast snowy expanse,

Life here would be what remained for Bertus and Turner.

"Did he… know who I am?"

"I'm… not sure."

The village chief had long known that Turner was much older than she appeared.

Did the other villagers know as well?

If the villagers had been playing along knowing this whole time, that would have been a really terrible joke.

Turner clenched his teeth, feeling both flustered and wronged.

They decided to stay in this village.

Honestly, they couldn't say that they hadn't been swayed.

Was there another chance?

An unexpected opportunity.

Just by imagining sitting in a place created by someone, they could plan for decades' worth of things they could do.

Since they could think of anything as long as they still had things to do.

But.

All those imaginings crumbled in an instant.

Turner's trembling fingertips, filled with anxiety.

The moment she barely touched his own hand, everything disappeared.

Some desperate will, asking not to do so, was conveyed through that single tremble.

It was no longer his place.

It could no longer be his.

All the fantasies about it vanished cleanly.

He had abandoned everything and left.

But, there were still things that remained.

There was some sanctuary in the place he had arrived at after running away.

And he hadn't arrived there alone.

There was no reason to fantasize or dream about something new.

He had chosen the life of a fugitive, and someone had always been with him along the way.

So, rather than putting on a new crown, he should cherish what remains.

Spending time with the remaining people and the remaining time was enough.

As he had told Anna.

Hadn't he answered that it was more than enough when she asked if he was satisfied with this?

More than enough.

An emperor who had lost everything.

The person who stayed by the side of the emperor who had become nothing.

Together with an overly generous person.

In an overly generous place.

Under the protection of some overly generous being.

How could he not feel a sense of excess that went beyond satisfaction?

Feeling guilty for being permitted such excess.

There was no need to hurt the world any further by dreaming of something more.

"Turner."

“…Yes?"

As Bertus approached, Turner's eyes filled with confusion.

Because it was a look he had never seen before.

"We…”

"…”

From that hesitant approach alone, she understood everything.

What he was trying to do.

What he wanted.

It felt like they knew.

"Ah, it's not possible… How, how could I dare…"

"…Why not?"

"Well… you, compared to someone like me… are much younger… and with such a person…"

As Turner's face turned pale and she stuttered, Bertus furrowed his brow.

"…Does that make sense?"

"…Excuse me?"

"If we're planning to live here for the rest of our lives, we have to pretend to be a married couple anyway."

"Ah."

It wasn't a situation where she could argue that wasn't the case.

"In this small village, are you suggesting we should have affairs?"

"No, not that… I mean…"

Bertus quietly sat down in front of Turner.

"We were asked to live, weren't we?"

"…Yes."

They had accepted that request.

And so, they had come this far.

"Then, can I ask you just one more favor?"

"Y-yes…?"

"I'm tired of hearing you say such things."

When would they do it?

When would it happen?

The message was clear enough just by asking those questions.

“…It's not impossible, you know."

They had spent years together.

Bertus, of course, knew that Turner was in many ways healthy.

"B-but! That's… that's… n-not… impossible, b-but… I've seen you since you were a baby! How could I…?"

"I don't care about that anymore."

"U-uh… You can't… you can't do this… please…”

Turner was on the verge of tears.

She couldn't push him away, nor could she not push him away.

She just started to choke up with a pale face.

If she pushed him away.

Since they wouldn't leave the village, they would have to pretend to be a fake married couple for the rest of their lives, and she couldn't force him to live celibate.

They said they loved each other.

Their love was so strong that those words were unnecessary for both of them.

There was no reason not to do it.

They had only pretended until now because Turner wanted to keep some sort of conscience intact, and Bertus respected that.

But now, Bertus didn't want to respect Turner anymore.

So in truth, it was the end of the story.

"I don't know, just stay still for now."

"B-but… that's… that's…!"

After that, like what she had just shouted with a red face at the banquet hall.

Every day.

In large quantities.

It was a huge mess.

CHAPTER 699

Epilogue - The Edge of the World

Since the new empire had proclaimed a law recognizing the landownership of the farmers who had cultivated the ruined land, groups of pioneers began to leave the city.

There were still many vacant lands where wild grasses swayed in the wind, and cautiously growing crops began to raise their heads in small farming villages.

While people from the rural areas had reasons to visit the city, there was no reason for city dwellers to visit these small villages.

On the southwestern edge of the continent.

It was an area that belonged to the safe zone, but it was neither a strategic stronghold nor a hub city. It was a medium-sized city, far from the empire's gaze.

Directly under imperial jurisdiction, Leonda.

In a small village, the residents consumed the crops they grew themselves to sustain their livelihood, and any surplus was sold in Leonda. Such villages had sprung up like mushrooms after the war.

In a nameless small farming village on the outskirts of Leonda, there was a stranger.

More of a vagrant than a guest, a certain man.

That man had been staying in an abandoned barn, empty ever since a cow raised in the village had died, for quite some time.

Beside the rotting straw, leaning against the barn wall, a man lay motionless as if dead.

"Mister!"

A girl with long, wavy brown hair came running towards the man.

"…"

The man slowly lifted his head, like a dying tree, to look at the approaching girl.

The girl, who had run all the way, extended her hand towards the man.

"Mister, you haven't eaten, have you?"

"…"

"Here, eat this. Mom said to give it to you."

In the girl's hand were three cold, steamed potatoes.

Mom said to give it to him.

That must have been a lie.

There was no village that would welcome a stranger like him.

The man stared at the girl for a moment and then took a potato and put it in his mouth.

"Here, I brought some water too."

A bite of potato.

A sip of water.

The man performed these actions slowly and deliberately, as if performing a ritual.

The girl watched curiously as the man ate the potato and drank the water.

The man, wearing a ragged cloak, ate the potato and drank the water with only his left hand.

His empty right shoulder, hidden beneath the tattered cloak, told the story.

The man had no right arm.

The girl patiently waited for the man to eat the three potatoes, one small bite at a time.

"Thank you."

With a brief word of gratitude from him, the girl took the empty water bottle with a bright smile.

In the distance, people carrying farming tools looked at the man in the barn and the girl talking to him, clucking their tongues.

‘Tsk. She won't listen no matter how much we talk to her.’

‘Shouldn't we give Sandy's mom a good talking-to?’

‘As if she would listen to any of that.’

‘Well, that's true… ’

The muttering of the villagers reached not only the man's ears but also the girl's.

"Don't worry about it. Adults are scared of strangers, that's why they act like that."

“…I suppose so."

The man responded to the girl's words, which seemed more mature than those of the adults.

It was natural for the adults to be afraid.

A mysterious vagrant, lying in the streets.

Sandy had been the one to find the vagrant. She screamed at the top of her lungs, called the adults, and brought him back to the village.

The one-armed vagrant.

Despite the villagers' various questions, the stranger refused to reveal anything about himself.

He moved sluggishly, as if he were dying, or rather, as if he were already dead. His eyes lacked focus as well.

He appeared ominous, or perhaps afflicted by some terrible disease.

So, it was odd for Sandy to approach this menacing drifter.

While the village wasn't entirely inhospitable, nobody wanted to get close to the stranger.

After regaining consciousness in Sandy's home, the stranger complied with her mother's polite request to leave and took up residence in an abandoned barn on the outskirts of the village, spending his days sitting there.

Since then, he had been subsisting on potatoes, sweet potatoes, or pieces of bread that Sandy brought to him in secret.

Was he planning to just sit there indefinitely?

The villagers cast such glances at the drifter, who sat motionlessly in a corner of the barn.

The man barely moved throughout the day.

No one visited him except Sandy, and passersby wondered if he had died in that position.

Sandy was certainly an oddity.

None of the other children in the village approached the sinister drifter.

They speculated that he might be a ghost that devoured humans, or even a ghost itself.

Despite the children's warnings and the adults' scolding, Sandy continued to care for the stranger.

In this way, the stranger had occupied the village's barn for about two weeks.

By now, the villagers' patience was wearing thin, and they wished he would leave.

Of course, Sandy had no interest in such concerns.

The stranger, whom people suspected of being mute, had begun to utter very short sentences to Sandy.

After finishing her meal, Sandy smiled at the silent stranger and asked, "Do you know?"

"…"

"This barn smells like when it used to house cows."

"…"

"Even though there are no cows now, it still has a terrible smell."

His disheveled hair and messy beard made it inevitable that he would emit a foul odor, and the barn in which he was staying began to smell as bad as when cows were kept there.

"I suppose so."

The man responded simply to Sandy's words.

It smells terrible.

I see.

At this simple exchange, Sandy's eyes widened in surprise.

“…I meant that you should take a bath."

"…"

"There's a stream nearby."

The man didn't respond to all of Sandy's words.

By now, Sandy had somewhat understood.

The man was nearly deaf.

So when Sandy said something, the man would nod or shake his head without fully understanding the meaning of her words.

It wasn't just his hearing.

Sandy could now see that most of the man's senses were considerably dull.

The villagers didn't know.

It wasn't just his missing right arm.

His missing arm was the most noticeable, but his entire body was plagued by illness.

Sandy gripped the man's arm.

Their conversation was not hindered by his inability to understand.

"Let's go. I'll help you wash."

"…”

As Sandy pulled him with force, the man rose slowly but steadily from his seat.

It wasn't that Sandy had forced him up, but rather, he had no choice but to rise.

The man was suspicious, silent, and ominous.

In truth, upon closer and longer observation, Sandy knew that there was no one who listened as well as this man.

Sandy had always been considered an oddball in the village.

She would always go to places she was told not to, and do things she was warned against. If she was told she absolutely had to do something, she would refuse to do it.

She was like a contrarian frog.

The village children would grit their teeth at the mere mention of Sandy, having been victims of her pranks and tricks countless times since they were young.

Thus, it was inevitable that Sandy's parents had essentially given up on her.

However, this time seemed a bit more dangerous.

Sandy couldn't provide any concrete evidence as to why it was dangerous, but she had started to take care of a mysterious wanderer who was undoubtedly a risk.

Everyone tried to dissuade Sandy, but as always, her stubbornness only intensified her care for the wanderer.

She had even brought him to the riverbank and was washing him vigorously.

The wanderer submitted to Sandy's touch without resistance, as if he were an object.

She lathered his coarse hair with soap, scrubbing not only his head but also his face and beard.

It was as if a small mother was taking care of a big baby.

Take off your clothes.

……

Seeing Sandy trying to undress the man, a villager intervened, scolding her for going too far. Only then did Sandy stop her outrageous behavior.

"Aren't you ashamed, relying on a child to wash you because you can't do it yourself?"

The village woman yelled, recognizing that both Sandy and the man had their own issues.

“…I see."

But the wanderer only said that much.

"What a nasty fellow."

"Leave it, Auntie!"

In the end, the village woman could not continue her scolding and had to leave due to Sandy's persistent cries.

The next day.

Somehow, Sandy saw the man wearing clean, freshly washed clothes.

The next morning.

The man had washed and hung the dirty clothes out to dry. He was leaning against the wall of the barn.

"What, did you do it yourself?"

“…Yes."

At his brief response, Sandy gave a subtle smile.

Then, she vigorously patted the man's head.

As if to praise him.

"Good for you, mister, knowing how to wash yourself."

"……”

“…Did you not hear me teasing you?"

"……”

"I can't tell if you can hear me or not."

Sandy couldn't figure out what the man was thinking either.

Certainly, he had washed his clothes and body somewhere during the night, as the terrible stench was gone.

But his worn-out clothes and the unkempt, bothersome hair and beard remained the same.

Today, Sandy brought him some thin, baked bread.

"Don't hate my mom too much. She's just really scared."

"……"

"Since I'm not the one bringing food, she's even helping with your share, you know?"

"…I see."

Neither liking it nor disliking it.

Everyone has feelings they can't quite put into words.

Of course, Sandy's odd behavior and the mysterious wanderer were both disliked and feared.

It was pitiable to leave him to starve to death.

Sandy's mother couldn't stop her daughter's strange behavior, nor could she let her daughter go without food so she could give it to the vagrant. So, she reluctantly prepared enough food for Sandy to give the vagrant his share.

The villagers hoped the vagrant would disappear, but they didn't wish for him to die within the village.

So even though they were afraid of the vagrant and disapproved of Sandy's actions, they couldn't help but be impressed.

They had thought Sandy was just a reckless troublemaker, but they discovered

another side of her – one that was kind and gentle.

And Sandy hadn't just brought bread.

Suddenly, she took a knife from her pocket.

"Sir, hold out your chin."

Sandy blinked her eyes and brandished the knife threateningly.

"…"

"I'll shave that ugly beard for you."

Of course, the man didn't seem frightened or flustered. He just stared at Sandy with dull eyes.

"I've seen my dad do it often, so I should be able to do it well."

Sandy grabbed the tip of the man's chin, and even when she pressed the knife against it, he showed no reaction.

"…Is this right?"

The girl, who had never shaved a beard before, hesitantly tilted her head as she tried to shave the man.

The man seemed indifferent or numb, just standing there blankly.

"Oh… It seems to be working somehow…"

Of course, the first-time shaving would not be smooth, and the knife was not even meant for shaving.

So it was bound to be clumsy.

As Sandy approached the man's face to shave his chin and neck, she soon discovered something strange.

"…Huh?"

It was only then that she noticed something hidden beneath the man's clothes on his neck.

A small silver chain connected to a loop.

At its center was a necklace with a crimson gemstone embedded.

It was clear at first glance that it was not just an ordinary gemstone. Instead of a simple crimson hue, the color swirled like a whirlpool within the gemstone.

"Sir… What is this…?"

Just as Sandy's curiosity led her to reach for the necklace.

Thud!

"Ouch!"

The man, who had been sluggish like a tortoise until now, roughly grabbed Sandy's wrist.

The man's previously blurry eyes found focus.

And he stared intently into Sandy's eyes.

"Don't touch it."

At that near-commanding, powerful warning, Sandy dumbly nodded.

"Uh, um… Yeah."

Even the rebellious Sandy couldn't help but nod furiously under the weight of the pressure in the man's words.

The man hid the exposed crimson gemstone necklace back under his clothes.

With a shaky feeling, Sandy resumed shaving the silent man's beard.

Of course, she was still clumsy.

"Hey! What are you doing?"

"Ah! You startled me!"

A villager, who had mistaken Sandy holding the knife to the man's neck for something else, shouted in shock. Startled, Sandy accidentally cut the man's cheek with the knife.

"Uh, um… Sir, I'm sorry…”

"…”

"Ma'am! You scared me!"

"Sandy! What dangerous thing are you doing? Can't you stop?"

Even as blood began to flow from the cut on his cheek, the man seemed to feel nothing, staring blankly into space.

In the end, Sandy had to call upon the village elder to disinfect the wanderer's wounds and apply a bandage.

She also used a knife to trim his excessively disheveled and tangled hair, tidying it up somewhat.

"Hmm…”

Sandy stared intently at the man after shaving his face and arranging his hair.

“…You're not an old man, but a younger brother?"

Seeming amazed, Sandy continued to gaze piercingly at the man's face.

However, what was even more astonishing was something else.

The man, who had reacted sensitively to the touch of the necklace without even touching it, remained unfazed despite his injuries.

What was that necklace?

Sandy couldn't help but grow more curious.

The man, who appeared to have nothing, wore a necklace that seemed mysterious and precious at a glance.

"Is that necklace some kind of incredible treasure?"

At Sandy's question, the man slowly turned his eyes to look at her.

“…No."

He didn't entirely ignore her question.

"Absolutely not."

With his eyes closed, the man leaned against the wooden wall of the barn.

"But it's more important than anything else in the world…”

That was the longest answer the man had given Sandy so far.

The most important thing in the world.

But it wasn't a treasure.

Sandy couldn't understand the man's words.

How could something be important but not a treasure?

If it's not a treasure, why is it the most important thing in the world?

Sandy laughed mockingly.

With a smile tinged with malice.

"Why would someone like you have the most important thing in the world?"

How could a dying wanderer on the side of the road have such a thing?

Having taken care of the wanderer up until now, Sandy felt entitled to make such a

malicious joke.

At Sandy's words, the man stared blankly at the sky.

“…I don't know either."

Clearly, the man wore a faint, bitter smile.

Although she was taking care of him, she thought he was a very strange person.

Thinking this, Sandy gently stroked the man's hair, which appeared somewhat sad.

Swoooosh

On a day when the world seemed to be submerged in a torrential downpour.

There was a dreadful and miserable battle that nobody witnessed.

'For an old monster like me, this end is fitting… '

The last monster, his heart pierced by a golden spear, was actually delighted.

'In the only era when all five relics appeared, to die by having my heart pierced by the last relic… What an undeserved conclusion… '

Ludwig watched the last monster, which seemed happy to be killed, with wide eyes.

As he was dying.

The old monster crushed his own chest and took something out.

The old monster was smiling.

'Young man… '

'If you truly wish to become a hero… '

'You must take this… '

'This, if left alone, will bring ruin to the world… '

'But if you bear it, it will only bring ruin to you.'

'As long as you do not fall, as long as you endure, the world will be peaceful.'

'The Relic of Courage.'

'The relic that is said to grant the power to confront anything.'

'It will grant you the strength to bear it.'

'But it will never bestow upon you the power to surpass it… '

'Perhaps for your entire life, bearing this… '

'That will be the glory you must shoulder.'

'Destruction will befall you.'

'Perhaps, do you understand?'

'Whether you will find a way to completely annihilate this… '

'But such a day will probably never come.'

'O master of the final relic.'

'O apostle of courage.'

'You have won, but… '

'By winning, you are burdened with eternal destruction… '

'Carrying the yoke of sins committed by others, sins you have not committed, for your entire life.'

'That will be your fate… '

'And no one will remember you… '

'How can this be… '

'So bittersweet and… '

'Glorious and… '

'Miserable of an ending… '

The last monster vanished as if melting into the raindrops with a seemingly satisfied smile.

He had no choice but to take the crimson jewel that remained in the monster's place, even though he didn't know what it was.

The moment he took it, the man had an intuition.

That bearing this for the rest of his life would be his destiny.

He had won, but.

He knew that there was a price for victory.

From then on.

Every day was hell for the man.

CHAPTER 700

The man awoke from his dream to find the day already bright.

He had merely endured.

He had lived for five years after that time, during which he had to bear the weight of a lifetime.

Not crumbling.

Not falling down. The man, whose life's work had been to never fall, now lived a directionless life within the last mission of never crumbling.

Not knowing where to go.

Unable to settle anywhere.

He walked an endless path, unsure whether it was flight or advance.

A wanderer in search of the unattainable, the eternal wanderer.

The role given to the Apostle of Courage and the owner of the last relic was just that.

Although everything was fading away, the flame had not yet been extinguished.

As long as it didn't go out, it could burn.

Holding in his arms the most important and dangerous item in the world.

Without revealing to anyone that he possessed it.

He walked aimlessly and sometimes rested.

The man quietly looked up at the sky.

Amidst countless hallucinations, he strained his ears to hear what was now barely

audible.

As if trying to listen to the sound of the world.

How much time had passed?

"Mister!"

He saw the innocent, mischievous, and gentle girl running towards him.

How many days had he been in this nameless village?

He couldn't remember clearly.

However.

It was time to leave the village where the cute, lovable, gentle, and mischievous girl lived.

"Today, I brought sausages too."

The girl, with a bright expression, held out a sausage sandwich. The man shook his head.

"Sandy."

“…Yes?"

For the first time since he arrived in the village, the man called the girl by her name.

The dying man's gaze returned, and the revitalized man stood up from his seat.

The man, who had always crouched down, had always been at the same eye level as the girl.

But now, the difference in height between the standing man and the girl was significant.

As the girl straightened her bent back, she looked up at him, mouth agape, surprised by his height.

To Sandy, the man seemed to have become an entirely different person.

The man looked down at the girl and spoke.

"Tell the villagers."

"Tell them… what?"

She wondered what he meant.

"Tell them not to come outside until the sun sets, no matter what happens."

The man was strange.

Sandy knew he was strange.

But, really.

She had no idea just how strange he was.

The man began to walk somewhere silently.

From somewhere, the sound of horse hooves reached the man's distant ears.

Sandy did not know what the man's intentions were when he said those words.

But, for some reason, he seemed serious.

Just as she had shouted in all directions when she had to save the fallen man, Sandy shouted the same way this time.

Sandy didn't simply tell them, "The wandering man says not to come outside."

That would have been just a strange statement, and no one would believe it.

So, Sandy devised a plan.

She said a monster had appeared near the village.

And that they shouldn't go outside.

She screamed loudly.

Fortunately, even the notorious little mischief-maker Sandy had never joked about monsters before.

At the mention of a monster, the villagers closed their doors in fear.

Some people asked Sandy what kind of monster had appeared. Sandy didn't know exactly but said it was a terrifying and vicious-looking monster, and they should stay quiet until it passed.

However, Sandy's mother and father thought Sandy was playing another cruel prank.

At the moment when they were determined to give Sandy a good beating this time:

-Thump thump thump thump thump!

From afar, an indiscernible thunderous sound began to reach them.

They didn't know if it was a monster or not.

But knowing that something terrible had happened, Sandy's parents took Sandy and hid inside their house.

The villagers didn't know precisely what was happening.

However, the thunderous noise grew louder and closer to the village.

As it grew closer and closer,

From the moment something seemed to have arrived at the village:

-Whinnying!

A dying horse's sound.

-Arggh!

"What, what is that thing…?!"

The sound of people dying.

Soaked everyone's ears in fear.

Around the time the screams had subsided, naturally, it was Sandy who burst out of the house first, pushing past her restraining parents.

Night had already fallen.

Sandy, who had rushed frantically to the place where the screams and sounds of death had been heard, saw it from the edge of the village, already shrouded in darkness.

Dead horses.

Dead people.

And scattered military flags.

In between them, a one-armed man stood, bathed in pale moonlight.

The golden spear in his left hand.

The man, who looked too weak to break even a single tree branch, had killed dozens of mounted soldiers.

"Mister…?"

Even with a strong heart and a high tolerance for unusual things, Sandy couldn't help but collapse upon seeing the scene.

At Sandy's call, the golden spear in the man's left hand disappeared like a mirage, as if it had never been there.

The man slowly approached Sandy, who was trembling as she sat down.

"Ah, ah…”

Then, the man crouched down carefully to meet Sandy's eye level.

With their eyes locked, the man said, "They were bandits."

"…”

"I saw the village further west from here being plundered by them. Then they brutally killed everyone in the village. Children, the elderly, everyone."

"…”

"I didn't intend to care about it. A bandit's business… It's not my concern."

One cannot concern oneself with all the matters of the world.

But the man stayed in this village.

Even when people gave him hints.

And sometimes threats.

Without a word.

He sat in the corner of the barn, waiting for something.

It wasn't because the man was unable to see the existence of the bandits with his eyes open.

"Sandy."

"In goodness… there is no given reward."

"Living kindly or living virtuously."

"Doesn't bring happiness, nor is a reward given."

"That's why there are more cases of suffering."

The man placed his hand on Sandy's head.

As Sandy had done occasionally when she felt sorry and pitiful for the man.

The hand that seemed like it belonged to a dead person was now so big and warm.

Sandy stared blankly at the man.

"But sometimes there is a reward for being good."

"For being kind."

"Sometimes there should be a reward just for that reason."

"Though it's not always given."

"If you live that way, sometimes there should be good things."

"So people can, at least a little, affirm goodness."

"On the road, there lay a dying, filthy beggar. A young girl couldn't bear to watch, and she helped the man."

"Apparently, that beggar repelled all the thieves who were planning to attack the village…"

"Well, there's no harm in such an unbelievable story."

A person who could be ignored.

Someone who could be left to die without concern.

A girl who couldn't bear to see such a person and went around the neighborhood shouting loudly.

And that strange girl took care of the beggar wholeheartedly.

She provided him with meals.

Washed him.

Shaved his beard.

And became a companion to him.

It was a repayment for the girl's kindness.

The man had no interest in thieves.

However, he had no choice but to repay the kindness the girl had shown him with what he was capable of.

Knowing that the thieves would come to this place, he did not succumb to the villagers' hints and quietly guarded the stable.

In the end, the villagers were also kind.

Though they gave hints, they did not chase him away with a club.

The heart of everyone in the village, that they could not help but feel.

And Sandy's mischievous yet gentle kindness.

In order to repay her, the beggar stayed in the stable for a long time, without any hint of leaving.

"Sandy…"

"I'm sorry."

"For making you witness such a horrible scene…"

"That's why I told you not to come out…"

But there was nothing that could be done about the girl witnessing the scene.

The man carefully reached out his hand to Sandy's cheek.

"Thank you."

"You don't have to be this kind in the future."

"But your kindness… It made me feel joy for the first time in a long while…"

"I hope you understand."

After caressing her cheek a few times, the man slowly stood up.

Sandy still did not know what had happened.

She didn't know who the man was.

However.

Because Sandy had saved someone.

Through some people's death.

The village was saved.

The girl spoke to the back of the wanderer, who was about to leave without a word.

"Mister."

At the girl's call, the man stopped.

"Where… are you going?"

Without turning to the girl's vague question, the man replied.

Somewhere, he was searching for something.

Unable to know where that place was, he wandered aimlessly.

"A place of eternal rest."

And so, while walking.

To the most important, yet saddest beings in the world.

The wanderer of eternity set off to find the land that could provide eternal rest.

The eternal wanderer walks aimlessly, searching for the land of rest.

Without even knowing where it is or if it even exists.

In front of the man who started walking out of the village edge without any plan.

Under the moonlight, there were two shadows.

One was standing, and the other was sitting on the edge of a rock.

The man stopped quietly in front of those shadows.

"It's been a long time, Ludwig."

A blurry face seen through the dim sight.

A distant voice.

Ludwig remembered that face and voice.

Her red hair, even visible in the moonlight.

"Scarlett?"

His dear friend was waiting for him under the moonlight.

And behind her.

A being whose identity could be recognized solely by the pair of horns.

"It's been a while."

The ruler of the continent.

The Demon King.

"Reinhardt…”

The being with a name that could be heard everywhere sat on the rock's edge, looking at Ludwig.

"What brings you here?"

Almost instinctively, a golden spear appeared in Ludwig's left hand.

“…Is that Alixion?"

"…”

"Relax your face. Do you think I came here to fight?"

The emperor raised both of his arms to show he had no intention of being hostile.

How did he find me?

Although Ludwig was curious, in reality, it might not have mattered.

His opponent was the ruler of the continent.

Eventually, whatever he sought would be found.

If he spread the chain of coincidences wide enough and waited for someone to get caught in it, he would eventually find what he wanted.

In the end, Ludwig was simply caught in that chain.

"It was you after all, wasn't it?"

The demon king spoke quietly.

More precisely, he was staring intently at the necklace hidden beneath Ludwig's clothes.

"…”

Ludwig didn't respond.

But the opponent's gaze seemed to know everything without even hearing an

answer.

"Having saved my life, why did you disappear, even if you couldn't show any respect?"

"Because I didn't save you because I thought you were right."

At Ludwig's words, Reinhardt sighed.

"Right, you saved my life, so if I waste it, you'll come back to take it."

Suggesting that since he was alive thanks to Ludwig, Ludwig had the right to take his life.

Reinhardt added such words.

"But can you endure that?"

At Reinhardt's words, Ludwig stared at the emperor with a hardened expression.

It had never occurred to him that he could endure it.

Every moment was like hell, but he hadn't collapsed.

"It seems I should be the one to take it."

"…"

"You have no reason to hold on to it."

"…"

"No matter how I think about it, it's right for me to have it."

Someone had to bear the burden of the Soul Stone, which would turn into a disaster if left alone.

Ludwig was constantly fighting against it in real time.

It was the heaviest burden in the world.

Ludwig was bearing the sins of others.

So, it was reasonable for the emperor to argue that he should bear it rather than Ludwig.

"I can't let you, whose life is so valuable, have something like this."

It wasn't because the emperor was right that Ludwig had saved him.

But he couldn't let the emperor bear such a burden either.

As if knowing that Ludwig would give such an answer.

"So, are you going to live like this for the rest of your life, wandering around the world like a nomad and dying?"

"It's none of your business."

"How about at least giving up this lifestyle? It's not difficult to make your life more comfortable, and if you won't concede that, I wish you'd recognize your own importance."

There was no need to wander around.

Not too long ago, he had almost died collapsed on the road.

At the emperor's suggestion to live more comfortably, Ludwig shook his head.

"I have to search."

"…"

"They are not monsters… They are just sad beings who had no choice but to become monsters."

"…"

"So, I have a duty to find a way to give them rest. And that task is mine to undertake."

They were not beings to be exorcised or burdens to be borne by someone else.

They were simply pitiful figures who couldn't find rest.

He had to find a way to give them rest.

That's why Ludwig searched for a place he didn't even know existed.

Scarlett sadly looked at Ludwig, tormented by his obsession.

The emperor stared intently at Ludwig.

"You're still as stubborn as ever."

The emperor had anticipated Ludwig's rejection of all his suggestions.

"Let me make another proposal."

"I have no intention of accepting anything."

"Have you ever thought about finding the 'End of the World'?"

"What?"

The End of the World.

Ludwig's eyes widened at the unexpected suggestion. He had no intention of accepting anything, but this was a proposal he never could have imagined.

"I'm currently trying to find out the extent of this world."

"We don't know if this continent is the only one, or if there are others."

"That's why I've been preparing an expedition for a long time to find out."

"We're about to set sail."

"Who knows?"

"Maybe you'll find what you're looking for there."

"Divinity, magic, and supernatural powers."

"Beyond those, there may be another power that could make the impossible possible."

A land of rest.

Would such a place truly exist?

Could there be another world beyond this continent?

Having become the ruler of the continent, the Demon King sought to discover if there was another world beyond the known existence.

The margins of the story.

Just as there had always been margins, something might exist in the margins beyond the ocean of this continent.

He wanted to find it.

Ludwig stared at the Demon King.

As if not expecting an answer, the Demon King took something out of his pocket.

It was a magic scroll.

"Use this if you decide to go."

Ludwig couldn't fully understand that the scroll was for teleportation to a specific location.

The Demon King looked at Ludwig silently.

"We don't have the kind of relationship where we enjoy seeing each other's faces. Go."

Indeed, they weren't close enough to engage in a lengthy conversation.

"And if it's really too hard for you to bear, leave it to me. I'm not asking for it forever, just a few months. If you die, it'll be a loss for me, you know?"

"I'll think about it."

There had been a purpose.

Ludwig received three suggestions, two of which he refused.

"Lastly…"

The Demon King looked at Ludwig with sad eyes.

"I'm sorry. For everything."

Ludwig didn't know why the Demon King was apologizing.

Shouldn't he be the one to say thank you?

Why was he saying sorry?

But the Demon King didn't say anything else.

Scarlet, with a sad expression, lowered her head as she looked at Ludwig.

Flash!

With the flash of the teleport, they disappeared as if they had never been there.

Ludwig stared blankly at the scroll in his hand.

The End of the World.

The Demon King was not content and sought to do something.

Beyond that, there might be nothing, or there might be something.

However, beyond the world known so far.

There would be other possibilities.

What couldn't be found on this continent might be found beyond the world.

It would be better than wandering aimlessly.

Ludwig didn't take long to decide.

Flash!

He unfolded the scroll, and light enveloped his body.

When the light disappeared and he opened his eyes.

Ludwig found himself on a hill overlooking a massive harbor.

Ships were setting sail.

It was a fleet heading towards the End of the World, the extent of which was unknown.

It was bound to be on a scale never seen before.

Among the gigantic ships akin to otherworldly vessels, Ludwig saw mermaids swimming in the sea.

And then, he saw it.

A familiar face.

A face he didn't think he'd see again.

"You've come, Ludwig."

The disappeared shaman.

"Detto… morian?"

Dettomorian was there.

The shaman, whose knowledge and intentions were always inscrutable.

It only made sense that a being wielding power beyond the understanding of the world would pave the way, venturing into an unknown place, searching for

something unknown, in a direction where an unknown power awaited.

"To the other side of the world."

Dettomorian would go with Ludwig beyond the boundaries of the unknown.

"Let's go together."

Overwhelmed by the vast ocean and the abyss beyond, Ludwig gazed at the massive fleet that would head towards the direction of dawn and dusk.

CHAPTER 701

Epilogue - The Spring Palace

At some point, a cat began to live in the Imperial Capital.

A cat with fur as white as snow.

The reason it was known as a cat living in the Imperial Capital rather than the emperor's pet was that no one in the palace claimed to be raising the cat.

There was no dedicated maid to care for the cat, and neither the emperor nor the empress, or anyone else, seemed to be feeding it.

Its appearances were unpredictable.

Sometimes it would sit on the emperor's lap and yawn, other times it would snuggle in the archmage's arms while strolling through the palace. It was also found dozing on the desk in the minister's study, and even discovered atop the chandelier in the main hall of the central palace's Tetra – no one knew how it had gotten up there.

The cat was even found in places other than the central palace, such as the Spring Palace and other seasonal palaces.

Thus, it was a cat that considered the entire Imperial Capital its home.

Though the cat had the considerable privilege of being able to climb onto the emperor's lap whenever it wanted, it was unclear whether the emperor was truly raising the cat. After all, the emperor never gave any specific orders regarding the cat's care.

Moreover, the cat appeared very infrequently.

Although it clearly lived in the Imperial Capital, there were times when it would not be seen for days or even months.

Since the Imperial Capital was vast, everyone assumed the cat must be somewhere

within its confines and didn't bother to look for it.

Then, every few months or even once a year, the cat would reappear.

Neither the emperor nor the empresses would search for the cat when it disappeared.

That's why it was known as a cat living in the Imperial Capital, not the emperor's pet.

The palace's only wild animal that would disappear and reappear on its own accord.

Though it was somewhat of a palace attraction, time passed without it being considered an important creature.

During that time, several significant events occurred in the empire.

One of the empresses became pregnant and gave birth.

With various incidents happening, time passed.

As time went by, the famous cat was eventually forgotten.

This was because the cat hadn't been seen for almost four years.

Rumors circulated that it may have died somewhere within the palace or got stuck between buildings or on a rooftop, but since neither the emperor nor the empress ordered anyone to look for the cat, no one searched for it.

However, the cat, which had disappeared so suddenly, reappeared once again.

The gradually forgotten cat began to roam the palace, looking exactly as people remembered it, leaving everyone wondering where it had been and what it had been doing all that time.

Around the same time, the emperor did something strange by bringing home an illegitimate child from somewhere. The palace was briefly abuzz, but the commotion subsided when the archmage willingly accepted the child without any fuss.

After that incident, more time passed.

“…Priscilla, haven't I told you more than once?"

"Yes…”

The second princess, Priscilla, was being scolded.

And it was her mother, the empress, the archmage who was doing the scolding.

Yet, even as the archmage reprimanded Priscilla, she couldn't help but look at the child sitting beside the princess.

The sight only made the archmage's expression more troubled.

The child had skin as white as snow, clear eyes, and shimmering, neatly braided black hair.

The face was as delicate as porcelain, carefully crafted by a master artisan.

Clad in an adorable frilly dress, the figure was so endearing that it became unbearable not to hug it.

However, Empress Harriet composed herself.

"How many times have I told you? Rune doesn't like this sort of thing."

"But still…”

Second Princess Priscilla pouted.

Among the Emperor's children, she was known to have inherited his unexpected and stubborn personality the most.

Everyone prayed that she would not inherit such traits, but they were in vain.

She had inherited that stubbornness that wouldn't be satisfied unless she did what she wanted.

"I didn't do anything wrong."

"What…?"

"What did I do wrong?"

Second Princess Priscilla.

In the end, she pointed to her younger brother, who sat vacantly as if his soul had left him due to their mother's scolding.

"It's Rune's fault for being so adorable, even though he's a boy."

"…!"

Without realizing it, the Empress bit her tongue at those unexpected words.

Prince Rune merely sat there blankly, as if he was accustomed to his sister's outbursts.

In the end, Priscilla had to endure a three-hour-long scolding from her mother.

In the past.

Ellen, who had been out of touch for four years and whose whereabouts were unknown, entrusted her child to the Emperor.

The reason for her absence was that she had returned to her hometown, Rezaira, for some time.

The Emperor had no choice but to understand the reasons for her return and her silence.

After a long-awaited reunion and conversation, the Emperor returned to the palace.

'…So it's Ellen's child. Of course, it's also mine.'

The Archmage, surprised by the sudden appearance of the child, couldn't take her eyes off the little one.

The child, slightly frightened, huddled up and clung to the Emperor's hem, timidly revealing only the face.

The sight was so endearing that she wanted to embrace the child right away.

'How could… she have hidden such a beautiful daughter all this time?'

'…No.'

'…Huh? You knew?'

'I didn't know… that's not it… '

'If that's not it, then what?'

'It's not… a daughter.'

'????'

It was then that the Empress finally understood why the Emperor had such an expression.

It was also around that time that the white cat reappeared in the palace.

Three years had passed since the four-year-old prince arrived at the palace.

Empress Harriet, who was also an Archmage, accepted Rune, the illegitimate child the Emperor had brought, as her own son.

This was not only because she had the most experience in childcare among the royals, but also because she had strongly desired it.

However, the problem was with Second Princess Priscilla.

Everyone thought that she might have issues with her sudden new sibling due to dislike or jealousy, but it was quite the opposite.

She adored him too much, which was the problem.

However, her way of expressing her affection was quite peculiar.

She tried to dress him in girl's clothes whenever she had the chance and refused to be apart from him all day.

Just as Priscilla had inherited her father's eccentricities, Prince Rune had inherited his mother's taciturn nature to an extreme extent.

It was clear that he disliked Priscilla's actions, but his expressions were not strong, so Priscilla ended up doing as she pleased.

Thus, when the palace's inhabitants took their eyes off them for a moment, Priscilla would transform Prince Rune into a little girl so adorable that anyone would want to hug at first glance.

“…Tch."

Having been scolded a lot and told not to approach Rune for the entire day, Priscilla, visibly irritated, walked down the corridor of the spring palace.

Priscilla was in a terrible mood.

Since tomorrow was Monday, and she had to go to the temple, the only day she could play with Rune, who was too young to go to the temple, was Sunday.

But since her mother would undoubtedly be by Rune's side all day today, she felt utterly defeated.

In this disconcerted state, a high, sharp voice pierced Priscilla's ears.

"Judging by that scrunched-up face, you must've gotten scolded by the witch again, huh?"

A little taller than Priscilla, with dazzling platinum blonde hair and a beautiful face, but an annoying sneer that was far from that beauty.

Priscilla's expression filled with irritation.

"What do you want?"

"You don't want me to tell the witch again, do you?"

The daughter of the Holy Empress and the First Princess, Amelia, was there.

Amelia sneered at Priscilla, who was clearly in trouble.

"You should be careful what you say about my mother, too."

"What else should I call a witch but a witch?"

If there was one thing Priscilla loved more than anything else in the world, it was Rune. The one thing she hated most was Amelia, the wicked woman with a pretty face but a malicious personality.

"Why is my mom a witch, you idiotic wench!"

"What…? Idiotic? And wench?"

"Yeah, you idiotic, empty-headed wench!"

It was due to their long-standing arguments that Priscilla's language had become so coarse at such a young age.

The palace maids passing by didn't even bother to intervene.

It was common knowledge in the palace that whenever Priscilla and Rune were together, they'd end up playing dress-up, and whenever Priscilla and Amelia crossed paths, they'd always fight.

Here we go again…

With that thought, they sighed deeply and continued on their way.

But their childish fights were by no means polite.

Infuriated by being called an idiotic wench, Amelia rolled up her sleeves.

She was the daughter of the Holy Empress.

She inherited not only her looks but also an incredible talent for combat that bordered on ignorance.

"You're going down."

Amelia charged, and Priscilla gritted her teeth.

-Thwack!

"Ouch! Let go?!"

"Will you let go?"

Amelia, gripping Priscilla's hair roughly, began to wring her.

In a fistfight, Priscilla stood no chance against Amelia.

However, she wouldn't give in.

Admitting defeat would only lead to that insufferable pretty face being filled with even more mockery and arrogance, which would make her even angrier.

"Ah! Let go! Let me go, you crazy wench!"

"Call me your sister. Sister. Do it, you insolent wench."

"No way!"

"Then suffer."

-Aaaah!

"Aaaah! Ouch! Ouch!"

As the daughters of the most respected beings on the continent brawled like street thugs, the passing maids sighed and continued on their way.

It was that common an occurrence.

-Stop it! Can't you stop?!

Finally, the Archmage, having heard the commotion, rushed into the corridor, and only then did Amelia let go of Priscilla's hair.

"Mom! She did it again! She hit me again!"

Priscilla hid behind the empress and cried out, causing Amelia's expression to contort even more.

However, Harriet looked at Amelia with a sad expression, biting her lips.

"Amelia… I always tell you to get along well with each other."

"…"

At the empress's rebuke, Amelia's expression only grew more twisted.

"And she called Mom a witch again!"

"Be quiet, Priscilla."

One of the main reasons Priscilla hated Amelia was that she was so brazen and called her mother a witch, yet her mother never scolded Amelia.

She couldn't understand why.

Instead, her mother seemed even sadder when she looked at Amelia.

She couldn't tell why, but she felt as if her mother was somehow apologizing.

"Hmph…!"

In the end, Amelia bit her lip and turned away with those words.

Priscilla could think of countless instances of being bullied by Amelia since they were young.

That's why Priscilla almost had a fit whenever she saw Amelia, who had been relentlessly tormenting her for reasons she couldn't understand.

From a very young age, Amelia would pinch and hit her for no reason, and often blamed Priscilla for her own accidents.

Priscilla had always been the victim, but now she could no longer be silent and began

to stand up to Amelia and shout.

"Priscilla, can't you please… get along with Amelia?"

Her mother looked at her with a sad expression and said those words.

"How can I get along when she starts it even when I'm just minding my own business?"

"…"

As Priscilla said, Amelia was the one who always picked fights for no reason.

From Priscilla's perspective, the injustice and sorrow she felt was inevitable. The accumulated resentment had led her to pick fights with Amelia as well.

Amelia had always tormented her without reason.

Not only did Amelia dislike her, but she also showed her dislike for their mother by calling her a witch.

While it might be because Amelia resembled her birth mother, the Holy Empress, there were still inexplicable aspects to her behavior.

One day.

Priscilla had seen it from afar.

In a hidden corner of the spring palace's garden, Amelia was sobbing while being held by her mother.

Even then, just as now.

Her mother, with a sad expression, held the weeping Amelia in her arms.

Priscilla couldn't understand why Amelia behaved that way, or why her mother was so tender toward the insolent Amelia.

There were two ways to keep Priscilla from tormenting Rune.

Either someone was always by Rune's side, or someone was always by Priscilla's side.

The archmage took a walk to soothe the angry Priscilla, and naturally, Prince Rune became free.

A total of four people lived in the spring palace, which had become the archmage's residence.

The owner of the palace, the archmage, Empress Harriet.

And all the emperor's children.

Amelia, who stayed in the Imperial Capital instead of the Holy Empire due to the Temple, Priscilla, and Rune, who had become Harriet's son, all lived together in the spring palace.

That's why the spring palace was bustling every day.

Prince Rune sat at a table in the peaceful tea-time hall of the palace, without his sister around.

It wasn't that he was particularly interested in drinking tea.

"Meow."

However, Rune simply sat at the table, his face close to the white cat, gently stroking its back.

The cat, as white as snow and quite pretty, basked in the sunlight, slowly swishing its tail with its eyes closed.

And Rune absentmindedly petted the cat.

Since the white cat had reappeared, it had often been by Rune's side, who had appeared around the same time.

First Prince Rune had always kept the cat with him.

As if it were family.

"Hmm…"

During this leisurely time, a voice from behind made Rune slowly turn his head.

First Princess Amelia, her arms folded, gazed at Rune.

"What, brat?"

Although she had been the one to look at him first, Amelia responded grumpily to Rune's gaze.

"…"

Rune, without saying a word, turned his head back towards the cat.

Amelia quarreled constantly with Priscilla, who, in turn, followed Rune around, doing all sorts of bizarre things.

Amelia didn't particularly torment First Prince Rune.

Nor did she follow him around like Priscilla.

Amelia acted as if she didn't pay much attention to First Prince Rune, treating him as if he were nothing more than a chicken or a cow.

Neither acting as if she disliked nor liked him.

However, Amelia approached Rune, who was preoccupied with the cat, and sat down in front of him.

Then, she looked around.

As if checking to see if anyone was nearby.

Upon confirming that no one was passing by, Amelia quietly grabbed Rune's hand.

"…?"

"Come here."

Amelia sat Rune on her lap and embraced him tightly.

"…"

"You're good… Yeah."

Then, she said nothing more.

As if just doing that was enough.

With a faint smile on her lips.

Rune, as if accustomed to it, continued to stroke the cat while embraced.

Neither striking up a conversation nor engaging in one.

Amelia, who wasn't expressive, adored the First Prince very much.

She was just clumsy in showing it.

The First Prince, who was naturally quiet.

The First Princess, who didn't know how to properly express her affection.

Priscilla kept Amelia from getting close to Rune.

Worried that Amelia might torment him as she had done to her, Priscilla sought to protect Rune. And Amelia didn't force herself to take Rune away from Priscilla, who blocked her as if trying to protect him.

Priscilla growled whenever Amelia passed by, unable to bear the thought of Rune suffering like she had.

Because she hated seeing that, Amelia avoided getting close to Rune when Priscilla was around.

She had no intention of tormenting such a cute and lovable youngest sibling.

However, when the Second Princess wasn't around, Amelia expressed her affection for her youngest sibling in her own way.

Embracing Rune, Amelia wore a happy smile on her face. The white cat watched them quietly, swishing its tail.

Just then, Amelia sensed someone's presence and carefully detached Rune from her embrace.

She couldn't understand why, but she found the scene too embarrassing for someone else to witness.

In front of others, she treated him like a mere chicken or cow.

Amelia's expression couldn't help but harden upon seeing the person who entered the tea-time hall.

"Amelia."

"Your… Your Highness…"

Amelia's mother.

The ruler of the Holy Empire, Empress Olivia.

Dressed in her priestess attire, Olivia exuded an air of sacred authority.

Although Priscilla and the Archmage were strikingly similar, Amelia and Olivia resembled each other as if cut from the same cloth.

"Shall we have a talk?"

"…Yes."

Hesitantly, Amelia followed her mother at a slow pace.

Her steps felt unusually heavy.

"…"

And Rune quietly watched Amelia's retreating footsteps as if being pulled away.

"Can't everyone… get along?"

"Meow."

At Rune's murmur, the white cat swished its tail quietly.

CHAPTER 702

Empress Harriet walked the palace grounds with Priscilla, having left the Spring Palace.

Indeed, Priscilla was a troublemaker, but the root cause was the persistent torment she suffered at the hands of Amelia since her early childhood.

"It doesn't make sense in the first place. If she hates Mom and me so much, why doesn't she just stay at the temple dormitory or live with her mother in the Holy Empire?"

As Priscilla pointed out.

It was Amelia's choice to live in the Spring Palace, even though she always claimed she couldn't stand the sight of them.

There were plenty of places to avoid them if she didn't want to see them.

Therefore, Priscilla could only think that Amelia was staying in the Spring Palace solely to torment her, nothing more, nothing less.

Listening to her daughter's complaints, the Archmage silently gazed at the distant sky.

"Priscilla."

"What?"

"Do you remember when Rune first arrived?"

“…Yeah."

Prince Rune was the Archmage's daughter, but in reality, he was the Emperor's illegitimate child brought in.

However, the Archmage accepted Rune without question or hesitation.

At the time, Priscilla was seven years old.

"I’m glad that you adored Rune. But has there ever been a time when you were upset with him? Even just once?"

"…”

Priscilla had been both surprised and delighted by her sudden new sibling, finding him utterly adorable from the start.

He was simply too lovable to hate.

But was there never a time she felt even a little jealous?

Watching her mother constantly following Rune, taking care of him, paying attention to him, and doting on him.

Could she truly say that she never felt a strange sense of unease?

“…I guess I did feel a bit like that."

"How so?"

Priscilla quietly looked up at her mother.

She didn't want to admit it, but she had no choice but to accept a certain kind of bitterness, akin to sorrow.

"I felt like… Mom was stolen away from me."

"I see."

Empress Harriet smiled faintly and gently stroked her daughter's head.

"Thank you for enduring it so well until now."

At the sudden praise, Priscilla's face turned red.

“…But what does that have to do with Amelia?"

How did her jealousy towards Rune have anything to do with Amelia? Priscilla pouted her lips, and Harriet carefully knelt down to be at eye level with Priscilla.

"You see, when the Holy Empress gave birth to Amelia, she was so busy with many tasks that she couldn't raise the child herself."

"…"

"So, for a while, I raised Amelia."

Only then did Priscilla understand what her mother was saying, and her eyes widened in realization.

As the Holy Empress of the Holy Empire, Olivia had far too many responsibilities.

Not only did she feel threatened for her own safety, but she also struggled to raise her child properly amidst her numerous duties.

That's why Amelia was raised not in the Holy Empire's central palace, but in the safest place—the imperial palace, by Harriet.

"So, in fact, Amelia has two mothers: the Holy Empress and me."

"…"

"When Amelia turned three years old, I became pregnant with you."

Harriet gently caressed Priscilla's cheek with a sad expression.

"After giving birth to you… the Holy Empress finally had some free time and took Amelia back to the Holy Empire."

As Harriet's expression turned sorrowful, recalling that time, Priscilla felt an indescribable heaviness.

"It's not your fault, but Amelia must have felt… that you had taken her mother from her."

Olivia had longed to spend time with the daughter she couldn't raise herself.

After giving birth, Harriet couldn't bear to be apart from Priscilla.

However, from Amelia's perspective, she had suddenly been separated from the mother who had raised her.

That's why Amelia couldn't help but think that Priscilla had stolen her mother from her.

There had been a reason for Amelia's tormenting of Priscilla since the days she couldn't remember.

It wasn't Priscilla's fault, but Amelia couldn't help but resent her.

Amelia was young, and still quite immature.

She couldn't let go of that resentment.

"Then, why does call Mom a witch?"

"It's because she feels left out. It's not that she hates me… she just loves me too much."

If she did that, she would get attention.

Because she would be noticed.

Finally, Priscilla seemed to understand, at least to some extent, why Amelia had been sobbing in her mother's arms, pretending to hate her so much.

"So, don't take Amelia's words about Mom too seriously. Amelia doesn't hate Mom."

In the end, Priscilla discovered the reason Amelia stayed in the Spring Palace.

She couldn't help but find out why she didn't live in the Holy Empire, and why she stayed in the Spring Palace instead of the Temple dormitory.

She didn't want to be apart.

"I don't know, I want to get along, but she started it first, so I don't know what to do."

"…”

Just knowing the reason for hatred doesn't mean it can be resolved.

That's why Harriet could only smile sadly.

"And when Mom and the Holy Empress finally meet, you two always fight."

Priscilla's sharp observation made Harriet's expression contort with discomfort.

In reality.

Although they respected each other when apart, when they met, they still bickered constantly.

While it didn't go as far as the petty squabbles between Amelia and Priscilla, their relationship was similarly inherited.

"Is… is that so…?"

"Mom, are you telling us to get along when you can't even get along with each other?"

"I'll try to get along, too! Then it'll be fine…! And I want to get along, but the Holy Empress always acts like that! What can I do?"

"That's what I just said. But try to get along anyway."

"Ugh…”

"How are you going to get along with the Holy Empress? Do you know, Mom?"

Harriet's face turned beet red and began to tremble.

"Why don't you take after your father and not speak a word?!"

"What?!"

In the end, the mother, like her daughter, exploded with a bang.

At the same time.

Holy Empress Olivia sat side by side with her daughter in the Spring Palace's garden.

"Are you getting along well?"

“…Yes."

Amelia sat beside her mother, fidgeting restlessly. Olivia looked at her daughter, who couldn't sit still.

"Do you still fight these days?"

It was obvious who she was asking about.

"Well… She started it…”

“…Is that so?"

"…”

At the Holy Empress' questioning, which seemed to know everything, Amelia eventually bowed her head.

"Why do you hate Priscilla so much?"

"…”

Amelia couldn't answer.

But even without saying it, she already knew.

Why she hated her so much.

However, she couldn't blame her daughter, knowing that it was her own fault for not being able to be with her when she needed her most during her childhood.

In fact, after returning to the Holy Empire, Amelia cried every day.

She wanted to see her mother.

She wanted her mother to take her back.

And so, the Empress reluctantly had to bring Amelia to the Spring Palace from time to time.

When that happened, the same situation would unfold.

She didn't want to go back to the Holy Empire.

With a newborn Priscilla in her arms, Empress Harriet didn't know what to do, and Olivia couldn't help but be dismayed.

As they repeated these unwanted goodbyes, Amelia came to believe that Priscilla was the cause of everything.

She began to believe that none of this would have happened if it weren't for Priscilla.

"Priscilla is your family, too. Even if you can't cherish her, you shouldn't hurt her."

“…She's not my family."

"…”

"My father is the only connection we have. Why is she my family?"

"I see. So that's how you think…”

At Amelia's words, Olivia gave a bitter smile.

She didn't even consider Priscilla her family.

No, she was envious of Priscilla.

Because Priscilla was the true daughter of the Archmage.

That's what she envied.

'Is it because I'm not your real daughter? So now that you have a real daughter, you

don't like me?'

'It's not like that, Amelia… It's not… I'm sorry. I'm sorry… But if you act like this… If I act like this… I will be sad… Amelia… '

Olivia had seen her crying in Harriet's arms, shouting these words from afar.

As she cried and didn't know what to do, Olivia could only watch from a distance.

And still.

Amelia did not call Olivia "Mother."

It was as if the word just wouldn't stick to her tongue.

When she finally managed to utter it, her own face would contort with discomfort.

Having spent such crucial time apart, there was a part of Olivia that she couldn't make up for.

And so, both mother and daughter found each other difficult.

They didn't want this, but it happened.

That's why, when her daughter said she wanted to go to the Temple and live in the Imperial Capital, Olivia reluctantly agreed.

Knowing that Amelia's true desire was to stay in the Spring Palace, not to go to the temple.

Still, now that they knew why things had turned out this way, Amelia also felt guilt and remorse towards Olivia.

That's why Amelia froze like this whenever Olivia came to visit.

Their relationship was filled with nothing but guilt and remorse for each other.

Olivia didn't scold or blame Amelia.

Olivia stared at her stiff daughter's face and gave a sad smile.

"Actually, even if you had always been with me in the Holy Empire, I don't think things would have been any better than they are now."

“…What?"

"Just… that's what I think."

Olivia looked up at the sky quietly.

Due to circumstances, Olivia had no choice but to leave her daughter in Harriet's care.

But would everything have been fine if she hadn't?

Olivia sometimes thought about it, but now she was more pessimistic.

"Do you know that the Archmage is from the noble family of the Duchy of Saint Owan?"

"Ah… yes. I heard she was from a famous noble family…”

"And what about your mother's background?"

"…”

Amelia couldn't answer her mother's question.

It wasn't that she didn't know.

She just couldn't bring herself to say it out loud.

“You know, I, your Mom was an orphan.”

“…”

“I was adopted by a foster father when I was young, but he wasn't a good person. He was someone who tried to accomplish something great by using me. I always had to live up to his expectations. I always had to be kind, gentle, and exceptional.”

“…”

“It felt like… I was living a life that was forced upon me without reason.”

Amelia didn't understand why her mother was telling her this story.

“So, I don't really know what a warm family is like or the proper behavior parents should have towards their children.”

Somehow, Olivia smiled like an innocent child.

“So, even if you had spent your childhood with me, there's no guarantee that it would have been better. I might have treated you terribly or failed to do the things I should have. You might have hated me even more than you do now.”

“I… I don't… hate you, Your Highness…”

“Really? That's a relief. Maybe we managed this much because we lived apart?”

Hehe.

Olivia laughed mischievously.

Without realizing it, Amelia's mind wandered as she looked at her mother's face.

She was the most difficult person in the world, but Amelia often thought her mother was also the most beautiful.

“Anyway, unlike me, an orphan, the Archmage was the youngest daughter of a great and noble family.”

“A good father, a kind mother.”

“And she had three older brothers who adored her.”

“So, I heard she used to be a very arrogant, ill-mannered, and haughty child…”

“Well, she eventually learned, you see.”

“What good parents are.”

“How good parents should behave, what a good mother is, you know.”

“I tried studying and learning about it, but I could never truly understand. But she knows.”

“So, she, the Archmage was probably a much better mother than me.”

“That's why you cried and wailed for days, wanting to go back to her.”

At Olivia's sad words, tears welled up in Amelia's eyes.

“I'm sorry…”

Amelia knew her mother hadn't done anything wrong.

That's why, looking back on her own words and actions, she couldn't help but feel guilty.

“No, it's because the Archmage cared for you and loved you so much. I'm grateful for that. Why would I resent her, or you?”

“Did you think you were the only one crying?”

“She cried a lot, too.”

“She said it felt like she was forcibly taking someone else's daughter away, watching her cry.”

“Anyway, that much…”

“She must have loved you like her own daughter.”

“She's a very grateful person.”

“How much did she cherish you that my own daughter treated her real mother worse than a stranger? Huh?”

At the teasing words, Amelia finally began to shed tears.

If I had raised her from the beginning…

She had thought about it countless times, but now it seemed ridiculous.

Not even knowing what a good parent was, if she had raised Amelia herself, things might have turned out even worse.

That's what she had come to think.

“I'm sorry. I… I was wrong…”

As Amelia began to cry, realizing that she was causing her mother the greatest pain, Olivia silently watched her daughter.

At the point of feeling apologetic, she already knew what had gone wrong.

Olivia knew that was enough.

While talking about someone's tears,

more than you cried,

more than Archmage cried,

she wouldn't say that she cried the most.

In places where no one could see, she cried alone.

Because such words would not make anyone happy.

"I'm not scolding you, Amelia."

"…”

"I don't want to say I'm hurt either. I mean, I haven't exactly been great to you either."

Olivia looked up at the sky.

"Do you appreciate Archmage?"

"…”

"You should."

"I do… appreciate her…”

Despite her almost tantrum-like remarks and even betraying her by calling her a witch, Harriet couldn't do anything but smile awkwardly and sadly.

On the days when Amelia would explode, she would, without Priscilla’s knowledge, secretly come to her at night and stroke her hair until she fell asleep.

But it wasn't enough.

And it was still sad.

Amelia had never been sincerely scolded or reprimanded for her constant tantrums and making life difficult for her own daughter.

She knew she should be grateful for that alone.

It's just that it hadn't been expressed in actions and words.

"Archmage loved you like that, even though you're not her real daughter, right?"

“…Yes."

"She loved you, who's not even her family, that much."

If Priscilla, who only shared a father with her, wasn't family, then naturally, Harriet and Amelia weren't family either.

She wasn't her real mother either.

Yet, she loved her like a real daughter.

"So, Amelia."

"…?"

"You have to return the love you received to Priscilla."

Because she received that kind of love.

Instead of trying to repay Archmage for her love, loving Archmage's daughter as a real sister was the repayment.

"Then, she will love you even more than she does now."

"…"

She would love her even more.

She would smile not because she was thankful and happy, but because she was really happy, and so she would love her even more.

However, in the end, it was the Holy Empress herself who spoke the sad words.

While hiding her own feelings, Olivia playfully smiled and patted her daughter's head.

"I'm not asking you to love me, but if you want the love of the woman you consider your mother, will you refuse my request?"

At Olivia's mischievous and sorrowful question, Amelia finally wiped the corners of her eyes.

It wasn't a demand to love her.

If you want the love of the person you consider your mother, you must do as she says.

In the end, Amelia knew too.

Even though they hadn't spent much time together, her mother truly loved her very much.

"I'm sorry… I'm sorry… I'll do as you say…"

So, Amelia forced her trembling lips to move and speak.

"I'll… I'll do as you say, Mother."

At those words, Olivia smiled brightly as if satisfied.

"Good, that's my daughter."

"…"

Olivia carefully embraced Amelia.

"But."

"You know."

"If we don't kill off the temper now, it might crawl back later."

"Just like someone."

"So, don't let your guard down too much."

"Because she's your sister."

"You have to treat your sister properly, right?"

At the Holy Empress's words, which were spoken with a playful laugh, Amelia couldn't help but feel taken aback.

"Yes…?"

"Be affectionate most of the time, but if she's acting up, scold her. You must establish a clear hierarchy."

It was impossible to tell whether she was saying to scold or not to scold.

"Understood?"

"Uh, yes…"

She knew that she herself was a bit strange.

But Amelia couldn't help but think that her mother was truly an odd person.

CHAPTER 703

That evening.

At the Central Palace Tetra.

The Emperor, who had been more active outdoors lately, had returned from a long-overdue inspection of the continent.

Leaving most of the state affairs to Empress Charlotte, he had been roaming around outside.

On his way back, the Emperor called all of his children for dinner.

It was a simple meal with his three children, without their mothers.

A solemn silence flowed through the dining hall.

Prince Rune was naturally quiet, and Amelia and Priscilla merely exchanged glances, as they had heard something earlier that day.

The Emperor cut a few pieces of steak and put them in his mouth, quietly observing the silent atmosphere.

"My precious little ones…"

"Judging by the ominous atmosphere here today."

"Again, it seems like you've been fighting quite a bit."

"Amelia, is it you again?"

"…Hmph."

Amelia pursed her lips at the look.

The Emperor glanced at Priscilla's hair.

"Priscilla, you've been bitten quite hard again."

"No, not too much…"

For some reason, when Priscilla spoke hesitantly, the Emperor widened his eyes in confusion.

"Wasn't it your turn to say that your hair was almost ripped out…?"

"No, it wasn't that bad…"

Somehow, Priscilla seemed more docile than usual today. Watching her, not only was the Emperor flustered, but Amelia too looked at Priscilla with confusion.

She wasn't usually like this.

On a normal day, she would immediately run to the Emperor's side, crying and complaining.

It was a daily occurrence for her to exaggerate that, even when her toes were stepped on, she'd act as if a wild boar had broken her foot.

But today, she was unusually quiet.

The Emperor observed Rune, who was silently enjoying his meal with a fork and knife.

The youngest son, who was the only one among the children who didn't cause trouble.

However, his future was a great concern.

Since trouble-free individuals usually end up causing significant issues later, the Emperor was more worried about his quiet and gentle son than his two daughters, who already showed rowdy tendencies.

Rowdy tendencies could be corrected over time, but a late-learned thievery could be frightening.

It seemed like he would end up causing significant trouble.

In other words, a too-pretty youngest son.

"…?"

At his father's intense gaze, the prince tilted his head, looking at the Emperor.

The Emperor's feelings were a mixture of love, adoration, and an urge to go crazy in various ways.

"Sigh…"

Not knowing what to worry about, but feeling extremely worried, the Emperor sighed deeply.

The prince continued to eat his meal while also cutting small pieces of meat to feed the cat.

However, that was a matter for later. The Emperor looked at his two daughters.

"Anyway, my precious daughters, I called you because I have a request that I hope you'll listen to."

"…A favor?"

"…What is it?"

"I know that you two leak secrets like a sieve. Whose daughters are you? Of course, you do, and it can't be helped. You must have taken after me. I know that even if I leave you alone, you both leak secrets separately, but when you're together, it's not just leaking, it's completely shattered."

Amelia, because of the life and death separation she experienced in her childhood.

Priscilla, because of Amelia.

Both of their personalities had become severely twisted.

"It's understandable for princesses to fight with each other, grabbing each other's hair."

"After all, children grow up by fighting."

"It seemed a bit excessive for such a thing, but… Anyway, I'm saying it's alright."

"If we're inside the palace, we can manage our mouths. Everyone seems to accept that now."

"But…"

"Please, just…"

"Is it necessary to fight in the Temple…?"

"It's not like I'm asking you to hold hands and pretend to get along."

"Can't you just ignore each other like watching cows and chickens…?"

"What's with the constant stories of you two fighting in the Temple, crossing the boundaries of different school years? How do you keep running into each other?"

"Rumors are spreading throughout the Empire that the two of you, grabbing each other by the hair, are on such bad terms that you fight."

"Rumor has it that the First Princess Amelia is a madwoman who beats her younger sister like a rat."

"And the Second Princess Priscilla is rumored to have a sharp tongue when speaking to her elder sister."

"Now, it's even spreading across the continent…!"

"Is it alright that every time I meet someone, I hear rumors about how troubled my children are?"

"Everyone says that…!"

"This wretched father is so ashamed that he can hardly bear it!"

"As both your father and the Emperor, I implore you!"

"To my precious and noble princesses, my daughters, I beg you!"

"Please… don't fight outside!"

"If you must fight, do it inside!"

The emperor trembled with anger. The two princesses remained silent with their mouths tightly shut at his words.

In truth, anyone could see that if they happened to run into each other at the Temple, their arguments would escalate into full-fledged fights.

"Furthermore, Amelia, it's not just the two of you. You go around hitting other children, don't you…?"

"…They deserved it, I guess."

"You did hit them, after all…! And Priscilla, you keep forcing strange medicines on your classmates, don't you?"

"…It's good for the body."

"How can you be so sure! You can't give them that…! It's illegal!"

"Father, you used to make your friends create such things without any issue back in the day."

"That was… that was different…"

The emperor looked at his troublemaking daughters with a drained expression.

There were so many sins committed that he couldn't persuade them even when he was right.

"…Anyway, I don't ask for anything else, just behave inside the palace. Let's not advertise that the imperial family is in shambles by fighting in the temple. Is that too difficult a request?"

The emperor knew that saying it wouldn't help; his words fell on deaf ears.

It wasn't the first time he had said such things.

Priscilla pursed her lips.

“…What right does a father, who isn't even our mother, have to say such things?"

"…!"

Amelia also let out a hollow laugh, as if she couldn't believe it.

"Father, you used to beat up kids when you attended the temple, didn't you? And you said it wasn't even comparable to what I do."

"…!"

The only perfect exception was the first prince.

The emperor was not an exception either.

No, in fact, it was even worse.

"I did, but…! Your father had reasons for it back then…!"

"I had reasons for hitting them, too. Why do you think I didn't?"

"That, that is…”

"I also made sure the things I gave them were harmless, you know?"

"…”

The daughters were aware that the scolding was baseless and showed no understanding of the situation.

"So, why did you beat up the kids when you were at the temple? And I heard that those who got hit by you back then are now all successful in various places."

"Right, I'm curious. Just how much did you beat them up for you to become a legend in the temple? You didn't even graduate. I even heard you hit your seniors, too."

At the mention of the emperor, the two sisters who didn't get along united in a rare display of camaraderie.

"Yeah, mom told me. She said you even tried to hit her when you were at the temple. I heard it all."

Upon hearing this, not only the emperor but also Amelia's face turned pale.

"What? You tried to hit the witch… I mean, the Archmage?"

"Yeah, for real. You can ask her later. You tried to slap her cheek."

Amelia was so shocked that she opened her mouth wide.

"How could you… try to hit such a kind person…?"

"I didn't hit her! I didn't!"

"So, you're admitting that you tried to hit her…?"

"Well, Amelia… there was a situation… it was the turbulent times… at that age…"

"It seems true. How could you… that's too much… no, why did you marry her…?"

Amelia's eyes were unfocused, and she mumbled to herself.

In fact, it was no lie.

He had actually threatened to slap her cheek if she said something wrong.

"Hey, kids… that's not the kind of story I wanted to tell…"

"Just mind your own business, what are you talking about?"

"…So."

The emperor tried to admonish them but ended up being verbally beaten by his daughters.

The emperor was actually not to be trifled with, but what could he do?

Emperor Reinhardt was not treated like a proper father.

-Nyang nyang

The white cat was eating the meat that Rune cut for it.

Its softly swaying tail seemed to be finding something very amusing.

The emperor tried to scold his daughters without knowing the subject and was pushed out.

It happened all the time.

But he couldn't just leave his daughters' misbehavior unchecked, so he repeatedly mentioned it, only to receive an upshot and say nothing more than to mind his own business.

On their way back after finishing their meal.

The emperor's three children were riding a magic tram heading to the Spring Palace.

As always, Priscilla had Prince Rune sitting on her lap, tightly hugging him, and Rune was hugging the cat just the same.

Amelia was sitting on the opposite side, looking out the window.

Although they would bicker every time they met and eventually end up in a fistfight, today neither of them had such thoughts.

After hearing about Amelia's childhood experiences, Priscilla realized that there was a reason for her previous misbehavior, even though she couldn't fully understand Amelia.

Amelia felt the same way. She knew that what she had done so far only worsened the situation.

Her mother had made such a request, and she knew that making the situation worse would not make anyone happy.

In the end, Amelia knew she was wrong.

So Amelia decided to do something she had never done before in her life.

"Hey."

“…What?"

"You didn't whine as much as I thought you would when you got hurt."

“…It didn't hurt that much, you know? Do you think I always just make a fuss?"

Amelia held back the response that naturally tried to come out, agreeing with her sister.

"What… well, thank you."

"…?"

Priscilla's eyes widened at Amelia's words.

She had never imagined hearing such words from Amelia's mouth.

"What did you just say?"

"Do you really want me to repeat it?"

Amelia averted her gaze.

Priscilla could be sure she hadn't misheard by Amelia's slightly reddened face.

However, their long-standing emotional baggage led to misunderstandings in this situation.

Did she take some kind of drug?

One couldn't help but wonder why Amelia would suddenly act like this.

“…What are you thinking?"

"I'm not thinking about anything."

In the midst of an awkward silence, the tram slowly moved along.

Priscilla gave up on trying to understand.

Amelia was as fickle as she was crazy, so Priscilla simply assumed Amelia felt like acting this way today.

If she continued to behave like this, getting along wouldn't be so difficult.

Lost in her thoughts, Priscilla looked at Rune, who was nestled in her arms.

Although Amelia was trying to avoid looking at Rune by staring out the window, she couldn't help but glance over, as this was the first time she had ever said such a thing.

And of course, she saw it.

Priscilla's expression as she smirked, looking at Rune.

It was clear that she was indulging in some perverted thoughts.

Admittedly, Rune was cute and pretty, and even Amelia's heart would flutter when seeing Rune dressed up like that.

But when it came to Priscilla, she was undoubtedly insane.

Rune was so quiet and timid; it was obvious that he didn't like Priscilla's behavior.

"Hey."

“…What now?"

"Everything about you is fine, but can't you stop dressing up the kid in those weird clothes?"

At Amelia's words, Priscilla's brows furrowed.

"What's with you? You didn't care before, so why pretend to care now?"

"No, the kid obviously dislikes it."

Amelia found Rune adorable, but when she tried to increase her affection for Priscilla, it waned whenever she saw her engaging in such antics.

"How would you know?"

As if to say, "Don't interfere," Priscilla pulled Rune closer to her.

How would she know? It was clear just by looking.

"Hey, kid."

"…"

"If you don't like it, say so. Your silence is making her think you enjoy it."

"What! Why are you suddenly talking to Rune instead of me? Don't speak to him!"

Ignoring the increasingly irate Priscilla, Amelia looked at Rune and asked.

Amelia was partly to blame for this situation.

Priscilla forced Rune into such ridiculous acts because he always remained meek and submissive.

"Kid, if you don't like it, say so. If you like it, say so. What do you think?"

Priscilla swallowed hard.

Rune had never once openly said he didn't like it, even though he clearly didn't enjoy it.

Encouraged by Amelia, Rune hesitantly spoke.

“…I don't like it."

"See? He doesn't like it."

"…"

At Rune's small reply, Priscilla couldn't help but bite her lip.

However, Rune's answer wasn't the end of it.

"But… if sister likes it… then I like it too."

“…What?"

Amelia couldn't help but be taken aback by Rune's response.

Neither could Priscilla.

He didn't like it.

Although he clearly disliked it, the reason he kept silent was not that he was a man of few words or expressed little emotion.

He was just being well-behaved because his older sister liked it.

No, if his older sister liked it, then he liked it too.

Amelia and Priscilla could not help but be taken aback by the unexpected response.

What a deep and lovely child he was.

Amelia's face flushed, her lips trembling sweetly.

She wanted to hug him right away, as if she couldn't bear it.

On the other hand, Priscilla became triumphant.

"See? It's fine! It's good that he likes it! You understand, don't you?"

"You crazy girl… Even after hearing that answer, you still plan to do that nonsense in the future?"

I don't like it, but it's okay because my sister likes it.

Shouldn't that be enough to make her stop?

Amelia's expression couldn't help but contort at Priscilla's response, which implied she would continue because he liked it.

Human beings were truly disgusting.

As expected, she was not wrong.

It was impossible not to think that the second princess, Priscilla, was a vile person.

"What? I won't do it anymore. That's good enough, right? It's funny that you pretend to know without knowing."

—---

Of course, naturally, Priscilla was also moved by Rune's words and had no intention of forcing him in the future.

In reality, Priscilla did more than just torment Rune as she hung around with him.

It was quite significant that she always stayed with Rune, whose reputation was inevitably bad because he was a bastard.

She taught him about life in the palace and always played with him.

After Empress Harriet, it was Priscilla who helped Rune adapt well to the palace.

So it was absurd for Amelia to act like this now.

When Rune found the palace unfamiliar and scary, she had done nothing.

This was outrageous.

Amelia's attitude, pretending to care for Rune now after never having shown concern before, was infuriating.

Humans were truly disgusting.

As expected, she was not wrong.

Regardless of her circumstances, the first princess Amelia was always like that.

"From the beginning, Rune never had any interest in you. It's too late for you to pretend to care now."

"What did you say…?"

"Am I wrong?"

The friendly intentions of the two were bound to crumble after just a few words.

"Rune, it's funny don't you think? What does she think she's doing, pretending to be a sister? Hmph."

As Priscilla asked a question seemingly looking for an answer, Rune hesitated and opened his mouth.

"I… like… my elder sister…"

At that single sentence,

Priscilla's eyes lost focus.

"What did you say…?"

"What did she ever do for you up until now?"

Naturally, Amelia only expressed her affection for Rune when they were alone, so Priscilla had no way of knowing.

Amelia laughed at Priscilla's reaction.

Her flustered appearance was delightful.

Very delightful.

"Where on earth did you get the confidence that he would only like you? Huh? On what basis? You tormented him by putting him in strange dresses. He was just being kind and patient, but in reality, he probably doesn't like you that much."

"Is that true, Rune…?"

Priscilla looked at Rune with a pale face.

"Is it… really… that you don't like me? You like… her more?"

He had just been kind and patient until now.

Had he been fed up all along?

"Both… I like… both…"

Upon hearing Rune's words, Priscilla felt as if her fallen heart had been reattached.

But she was still angry.

He liked that one too.

Amelia smiled with interest at his words.

She then stood up from her seat and approached Rune, sitting down in front of him.

It seemed like a wicked question had come to her mind.

The corners of Amelia's mouth curved up maliciously.

"Tell me, little one."

"…Huh?"

"Do you prefer me or her?"

"What kind of question is that!"

It was a ridiculous question.

Surely it was obvious that he would choose her.

She had taken care of him so much.

But the fact that she was forcing Rune to do something he disliked didn't change.

That's why Amelia thought it was a gamble worth trying.

If Rune preferred her, who had done nothing, Priscilla's soul would crumble to dust and disappear.

How satisfying that would be.

"Of course, it's me!"

"Well, I don't know what the little one will answer."

Amelia didn't mind if Priscilla were to be chosen, as long as he was honest.

After all, she felt happy that Rune had told her he liked her too, even though she had only occasionally hugged him. It made her want to hug him so much that it was unbearable.

Amelia's deep blue eyes stared intently at Rune.

"Quickly, who is it?"

"…"

Amelia grinned wickedly as she looked at Rune, while Priscilla watched Rune with desperate eyes, hoping he would choose her.

In the end, as was always the case with such questions.

"…Sob."

"!"

"Ru-Rune…?"

The young prince couldn't bear the situation and burst into tears.

"Sob… sniff…"

As the youngest sibling shed tearful pearls, the two sisters were at a loss for different reasons.

Priscilla's brow furrowed.

"Hey! Your stupid question made Rune cry!"

"Ah, no. I, I didn't…”

Amelia didn't know what to do, as she hadn't expected the child to cry.

While Priscilla and Amelia were at a loss for how to console the sobbing youngest sibling.

He muttered through his tearful voice.

"I like both of my sisters… sob… why can't you get along?"

“…Huh?"

"…”

"Do you have to fight…?"

Upon hearing his heartfelt words, Amelia and Priscilla stared blankly at each other.

What were they doing in front of a child?

It was a young sibling pleading for his sisters to stop fighting.

Even going so far as to make him cry with a question about who he liked more.

Was this really right?

Was this what a person should do?

Both Amelia and Priscilla thought to themselves.

They didn't know about the other.

But for now, it seemed like neither of them were human.

Both had the same thoughts.

"Ah, we won't fight. We won't… yeah."

Priscilla hastily spoke and glared at Amelia.

"Uh, um… little one. We won't fight. We should get along."

"Then hold hands…"

At Rune's words, the two instantly grabbed each other's hands.

Holding hands awkwardly, they vigorously shook them, as if showing Rune.

"We, we'll get along from now on, right? Th-that's enough, right?"

"Y-yes! Of course! We'll try! Yeah! Rune, I'm sorry."

As the two of them awkwardly held hands and forced a smile, Rune wiped the corner of his eyes with his sleeve.

Then, he smiled brightly as if he had never cried.

"We should continue getting along like this, right?"

Seeing his smile, the sisters thought to themselves.

Whatever else might be uncertain,

if they could see Rune's smile like this every day by just getting along,

"Of course!"

"Absolutely!"

They could get along well even with a distance of a thousand miles between them.

The tram arrived at the Spring Palace, and Run walked a little behind his sisters, who had moved ahead.

The two of them were still holding hands as they walked toward the palace.

Seemingly unable to bear it any longer, they glanced back, trembling.

They were checking on their youngest sibling.

With Rune's watchful gaze on them, making sure they held hands until they entered the palace, the two sisters finally resigned themselves to walking hand-in-hand.

Rune watched them until the very end, as they let go of each other's hands and went their separate ways the moment they entered the palace.

Rune hugged the white cat and smiled quietly.

"You're right, Mother."

-Meow

"It's incredibly easy."

-Meow

As if to praise him, the cat licked Rune's cheek a few times.

Why couldn't they get along?

To answer his question, the cat, who had transformed back into his mother, cautiously embraced her son and whispered,

'Rune.'

'Yes, Mother.'

'If they ever fight in front of you again, just cry.'

'…?'

'Then everything will be resolved.'

Rune didn't understand why crying would resolve everything.

'Why should I cry?'

Unable to comprehend his mother’s question, his mother replied,

'Rune's sisters may be very different from each other, but they have one thing in common.'

'The same thing…?'

'They both love Rune very much.'

‘…'

'Seeing Rune cry will hurt their hearts, so they won't fight anymore.'

It was a simple answer, and Rune couldn't understand his mother's words.

'And Rune is adorable.'

'What does that have to do with it…?'

Responding to Rune's question, the cat who had become his mother stroked his head and said,

'Sometimes, just that alone can solve problems in the world.'

Rune didn't know what his mother was talking about.

However, just as his mother had said, the situation was resolved when he simply cried.

From then on, if it seemed like they would not get along, he could just cry.

Whether or not they understood each other, the youngest's tears resolved everything, and would continue to do so.

"Being cute is a good thing."

However, the youngest prince discovered that he could use his cuteness as a weapon.

-Meow?

The white cat felt a chill as it seemed to see a shadow flickering in the prince's smile.

"Right, Mother?"

-Meow

Perhaps she had taught her son something she should never have taught him.

The white cat couldn't help but tremble in fear in her son's arms.

No one knew what would happen later.

Nevertheless, the spring palace, which used to echo with the sound of the sisters fighting, pulling each other's hair, was undoubtedly going to be peaceful for the time being.

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